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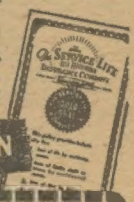

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Cover by H. W. Scott — *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

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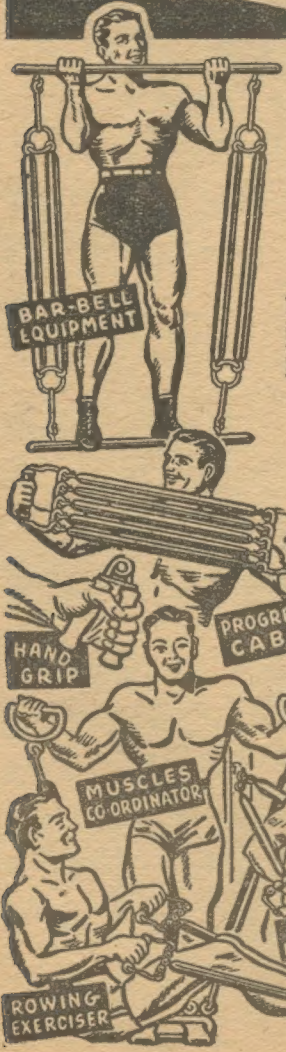

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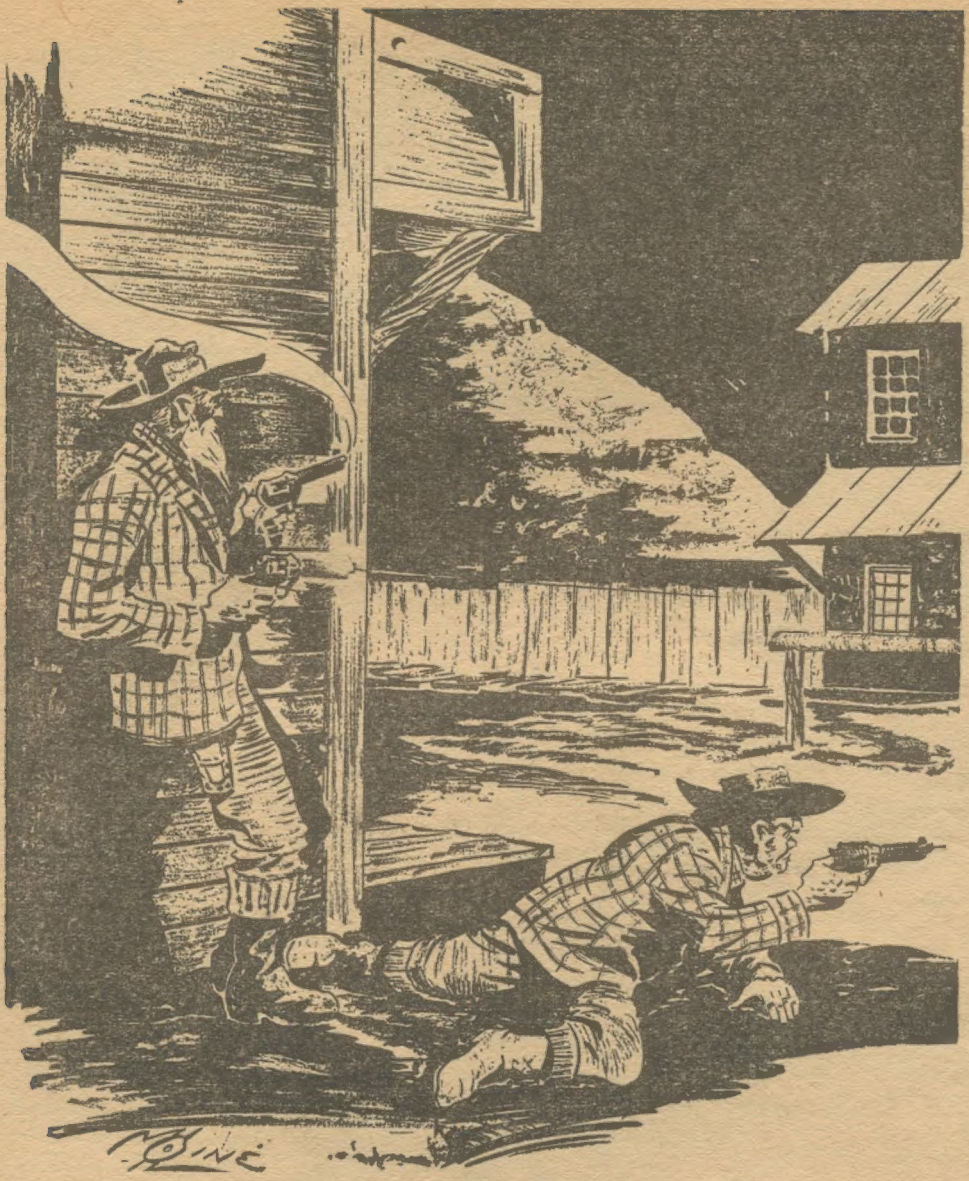

JUDGE BATES' GUN-BOUGHT GOLD

By Lee Floren

(Author of "Judge Bates' Shotgun Court," "Judge Bates, Coyote Catcher," Etc.)

Bates and Tobacco Jones blasted back at the ambusher.

A Complete Novelet of Judge Lemanuel Bates And Tobacco Jones

It was unfortunate that Judge Bates had forgotten an old-time code message and took a friend's letter at its face value!

WHEN they reached the mountain divide and rode down-slope, the rise of the peaks behind them cut off the driving spring wind. The cold afternoon sunshine of this high Utah country lay thinly over the boulders and the short green grass.

Judge Lemanuel Bates, his seamed face reddened by the wind, took off his mittens and stuck them in a pocket of his sheepskin coat. With cold fingers he untied his jug from behind his saddle.

"Looks like warmer weather ahead," he told Tobacco Jones, his gaunt and dour companion. "Yonder in the basin is the little mountain town of Jergens Bend. And down there, toasting his shins against a hot fire, is my old crony, Judge Jeremiah Carter."

He tipped his jug and liquor tumbled down his leathery throat. He corked the vessel and let it ride on the fork ahead of him.

"Tobacco," he said, "you miss much by not partaking of the flowing bowl. The warmth of whisky in a man's belly and the resultant—"

Hurriedly the judge grabbed for his reins; his bronc, shying suddenly, had pivoted, throwing the jug ahead, almost spilling the massive jurist from leather. Tobacco's horse reared and pawed the air, fighting the bit, but the postmaster held him under firm rein.

Judge Lemanuel Bates jerked his horse around, looking to see what had caused the creature's violent fear. They had been riding through a grove of tall cottonwoods. Tobacco Jones had quieted his horse and the lanky man was staring ahead, his eyes wide in his hangdog face.

"Death," the judge murmured, "and the horses scented it."

"Death by a rope," said Tobacco Jones.

THE dead man hung from a catch-rope, his neck broken and his head lying limply against the hemp. The cold mountain wind moved his pendulent body slightly to and fro. The judge felt a chill along his spine.

The wind had veered slightly, scattering the scent of death the other direction, and their horses quieted. Using his rowels, Judge Bates tried to push his mount ahead, but the horse rebelled, shying at the limp, hanged man. They dismounted, then, and tied their broncs.

Tracks in the soft soil told the story. A horse had been led from under the dead man, letting him drop a few feet to break his neck. Evidently the man had been a miner: he wore a mackinaw that covered a heavy flannel shirt and his gray pants, the legs stuck into hightop boots, were heavy wool. His hands were horny with callouses.

A piece of square cardboard, hanging from a loop around his neck, lay against his chest. The wind turned the body slightly, making the judge move in a semi-circle as he read the message printed in bold, black strokes of a paint brush.

Warning!

This man got what others will get who try to jump the claims of the Great Central gold mining company. Heed you his fate, and escape a similar one!

Judge Jeremiah Carter

Tobacco Jones bit off a chew. "Ain't Judge Jeremiah Carter the gent we was goin' visit, Bates?"

Judge Bates scowled. "What t'hell is this, anyway? Why gad, Tobacco, Jeremiah Carter and me went to law school together. This don't make sense. The week before he received a letter from Jeremiah Carter's wife, asking him to come over and spend a week fishing with the judge in the nearby mountains.

That had been the first time Judge Lemanuel Bates had known that Jeremiah Carter liked to fish; while in college Jeremiah Carter had been a book-worm and hadn't given a care to the lure of the rod and reel. But the judge, anxious for a vacation, had immediately written back and said he was coming. Tobacco Jones, not wanting to see his old partner make the long ride from Cowtrail, Wyoming, into Utah, had put his assistant in charge of his postoffice, and ridden along.

"What'll we do, Judge?" the postmaster asked.

"Cut the gent down," said the jurist, "take him down into Jergens Bend and turn the body over to the sheriff."

"But this ain't our business."

"You're wrong there," corrected the judge. "We're citizens and it's our duty to report this to the proper authorities. By gad, if this happened in my bailiwick, somebody would pay for it, and pay through the neck!"

A voice said behind them, "But this ain't your range, Judge Bates!"

THEY turned, two men pulled by surprise. The man had stepped from the brush behind them—he wore a heavy mackinaw with the collar pulled around his beefy, red face, and he held a rifle under one arm, the bore pointing nonchalantly at Judge Bates.

"Who are you?" snapped the judge.

The whiskery lips hardened. "I'm the gent that's makin' you put up your hands, Bates. Now raise 'em *pronto*. You too, Jones!"

Tobacco asked, "How'd you know our names?"

The judge slowly raised his hands shoulder-high. That question had been worrying him, too; they were strangers in this country. Only one man knew they were coming, and that had been Jeremiah Carter.

"Carter's been on the lookout for you," said the man with the rifle. "He gave me orders to take you into camp."

"You work for Carter?" asked Judge Bates.

"I sure do."

The judge studied him, holding back his emotions. This didn't make sense, he decided. Here Mrs Carter had written him, asking him to come and visit the judge, and now this gent—supposedly a hireling of Judge Carter—had a rifle on him and Tobacco. And behind them, moving in the wind, was the hanged man.

"T'ain't no use holdin' that gun on us, fellow," said the judge. "If Judge Carter wants us, we'll go to him. Fact is, we came a long way to visit with him."

The man gestured with his rifle barrel. "Put a stirrup up an' get into saddle," he ordered.

"But this dead man—"

"He'll be all right, Bates. He'll serve as a warnin' for other claim jumpers. Keep your hands away from your guns an' step up."

"You got poor eyes," said Tobacco Jones. "We ain't totin' guns."

The postmaster was right. Because of the discomfort the heavy gunbelts and weapons caused on the long ride, the pair had taken off their hardware. Tobacco had stowed his twin .45s and belt in his bedroll, tied behind his saddle. Judge Bates had put one .45 in his bedroll, and dropped the other in his sheepskin pocket.

"I want to get my jug," he said.

The jug had rolled into some rosebushes. "I'll get that," said the man. He backed to the jug, fished it out with his right foot, keeping his eyes and the rifle on the pair. He rolled the jug out, then squatted to pick it up.

For a moment then his rifle drooped. And, in that moment, Judge Lemanuel Bates acted. His draw was slow; he had put his mittens over his gun in his pocket. He had to jerk them out first to get at the .45.

The hunkered man jerked his rifle up, and let the hammer drop. Squatting, he sent his bullet toward the judge. But, because of his position, the man's aim was low. Judge Bates felt the bullet slam into the saddle-fork in front of him, then the sound became lost in the roar of his .45.

The man shot once more, the bullet slapping sod at his feet. Judge Bates' horse was rearing, fighting the reins. His Colt up, the jurist jerked the horse around, dismounted and walked toward the man, now lying over his rifle.

Tobacco Jones stared. "Is he—he dead, Judge?"

Judge Bates knelt, turned the man over. Two bullets had dug through the man's chest. The jurist looked up, his eyes bleak, and nodded.

"Wished I hadn't killed him, too. Tried to just wound him but that damned horse of mine was making too much of a ruckus. Wished he was alive so we could've made him talk; I'd like to know what this is all about. . ."

Tobacco Jones looked down at the jug. "That jub sure pulled us outa a tough hole."

Judge Bates smiled. He knew full well his lanky partner's antipathy toward alcohol. "That," he said, "is really an admission, comin' from you thataway. . ."

TWO HOURS later they rode into Jergens Bend. The pioneer mountain town was settled along the twisting bends of a small creek. There had been a goldrush here a few months before but, according to what Judge Lemanuel Bates had heard, the Great Central Gold Mining Company had moved in and bought out all the diggings. He had read that in the *Denver Post*.

Both of them now wore their guns. Tobacco led the horse of the ambush-

er—they had found the beast tied back in the high brush. That horse carried the bodies of the two dead men.

Citizens, mostly miners and townspeople, stood on the plank sidewalks and watched them. Judge Bates put his horse over and spoke to a man.

"Where's the sheriff's office?"

"H'ain't got no sher'ff."

"Well, then, where is the town marshal's office?"

"H'ain't got no marshal, either."

"Who represents the law here?"

"H'ain't nobody represents the law. Times got so tough, I reckon, that nobody'd take the badge. We had a lawman about three weeks ago, I reckon. Come one fine mornin' he showed up plumb dead an' we toted him up the hill. You rode by his grave, I reckon, when you rode in."

"I reckon so," said the judge. "Where does Judge Jeremiah Carter live?"

"H'ain't in town, I reckon. Him an' his missus been gone about a week or so, I guess. Some say he's out in the hills with the gol' minin' company. Who are them two gents, them dead men?"

The judge said, "Don't you know?"

The man ambled out and looked unconcerned at the dead men. "Strangers to me, I reckon. Take 'em down to the coroner's office. He's the hardware man, too, straight down the street. What happened?"

Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones rode down the street. They stepped down in front of the hardware store. They untied the dead men and then, each toting one of them over his shoulder, they went through the gathering crowd. One woman read the placard that dangled from the hanged man's neck.

"Say, that's Jim Hingerton," she said excitedly. "And look what that sign says—Judge Jeremiah Carter an' his cutthroat crew of gunmen hung him!"

"Who's Jim Hingerston?" asked the judge.

"Jus' a common, ordinary honest miner, fellow. He had a mine above the Great Central diggins. The richest strike on Grub crick, or almost the richest. They've hung him to get his diggins. That dirty Judge Carter—"

"Maggie," a man said, "keep your mouth to yourself."

The woman whirled, faced the man—evidently her husband. "I won't do it, Mike Grayson. I've seen enough of the judge's highhanded—"

The man clamped a hand around her mouth. "Get for home," he said.

JUDGE Bates and Tobacco Jones pushed through and into the hardware store. The proprietor, a thin, baldheaded man, locked the door behind them. They laid the dead men on the counter.

"You the coroner?" asked the judge.

"I'm the coroner. The name is Henry Swinnerton."

The judge introduced them and told his story. Swinnerton's eyes widened in surprise. "I can't hardly believe that of Judge Carter," he said, shaking his head. "Jeremiah and I were good friends. But a few days ago he just left town; his wife went with him. They tell me he is at the Great Central mine, west of town about fifteen miles on Grub creek. I've heard him mention you, Bates."

"What's he doin' there?" asked the judge.

"He's president of the Great Central Mining company. He bought a great part of the company—it was flat broke before the last gold findin's. Accordin' to what I've heard, him an' his missus decided to move out to the camp headquarters."

"Don't they ever come to town?" asked Tobacco.

The bald man shook his head. "Nobody's seen them in town since they left." He studied the placard again. "I just can't believe that Judge Carter would sink so low just for gold."

"Me, neither," said the judge.

Somebody was rattling the locked front door. Swinnerton went to it and opened it. Two men pushed in. The leader was a heavy-shouldered, thick-hipped man who wore regular miner's garb. One gun, tied low and well forward, rode on his right hip. The other was a thin, angular man definitely not a miner. His long face, thin and

mean-looking, was pale and sallow. He packed two guns, both tied low.

They came over and looked at the two dead men. Then the heavy-shouldered man lifted heavy, probing eyes to Judge Bates.

"What happened, fella? Talk quick."

The open arrogance of his voice angered the judge. But he held his temper and told his story. "Who are you??" he asked.

"I'm Jud Malone," said the heavy man. "This gent is my bodyguard, Spider McCarthy. Me, I'm the head of the local miners that's united to fight Great Central, Bates."

"How did you know my name?"

Judge Lemanuel Bates thought he detected something then in Jud Malone's green-gray eyes. But if he had, it was short-lived, for now the eyes were without thought.

"Heard somebody mention your name in the crowd outside," said Malone. "Well, you've done a good day's work, Bates. Hingerton was a member of my association. This dead gent here—this gunman—is Jake Blythe, one of Judge Carter's gunhands. Evidently they had spotted him behin' to watch aroun' for a spell while they rode off from the lynchin', huh?"

Judge Bates nodded.

Jud Malone turned, said to Swinnerton. "I'll go good Hingerton's funeral expenses. But Judge Carter'll have to bury his gunhand." He spoke now to Judge Lemanuel Bates. "If you need me, Bates, you can reach me at the Travelers Hotel down the street a piece. Look me up."

"Oh, sure," said the judge.

Malone glanced at him, noting the tone in which he spoke. Then, with Spider McCarthy following, he went to the door and went outside.

"Reckon there's nothing more we can do here," said the judge.

THEY went outside. The crowd, for the most part, had broken up. They walked down the rutted street, leading their horses. They took the beasts to the livery barn and then went to a restaurant, the judge carrying his jug.

The hour was early for supper and therefore the place had few customers. They took a booth and a brown-haired girl waited on them. Judge Bates found himself admiring the curve of her smooth thigh and then pulled himself back to the matter in hand. Tobacco Jones' words broke into the jurist's musing.

"Now how did this Jud Malone fella know your name, Judge? Nobody in the crowd was tol' what our handles were. An' that ambusher back there knew it, too."

Judge Bates cut into his steak. "That ain't hard to fathom, Tobacco." He chewed for a while. "Somebody's got hold of that letter I wrote to Mrs Carter saying me and you were coming to visit the judge."

Tobacco Jones scowled. "This judge frien' of yours musta turned into a reg'lar crook, Bates."

"That's what gets me," admitted the judge.

"What gets you?"

When I last seen Jeremiah Carter—and that was about ten years ago—he was as honest a man as walked the pike. That's why I can't imagine him hookin' up with this gold mining company and causing all this unlawfulness."

"Then what's the answer?"

Judge Bates' massive shoulders lifted, fell. "You laid one on me there Tobacco," he was forced to admit. "According to the way it hits me, it appears that this Jud Malone fellow has organized the free miners to fight Great Central. What do you think of this Malone gent?"

"Not much," said Tobacco.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If'n we was back home in Cowtrail, I could show you one of the want-placards I got jus' before we left town. Sent out from the postal authorities to post on my bulletin board. Jud Malone's homely big mug is on one of them cards, judge."

"You mean he's a wanted man?"

Tobacco sipped his coffee noisily. "That's what that placard said—wanted for using the mails to defraud an' for mail robbery. I never forget a face, judge."

"Wonder if that placard would be in the postoffice here?"

"Not in a town this small, Judge. They only send them out to third-

class postoffices an' better." Tobacco Jones studied his obese partner. "You aim to sit there an' tell me I don't know what I'm talkin' about?"

Judge Bates smiled. "Hang onto the ribbons," he soothed. "No, I just wanted to make good and sure before things went too far. That means this Jud Malone gent is out to get you, Tobacco."

"Why?"

"Read the handwriting," said the judge. "He knows I'm a judge and he'll know you're a postmaster. And he'll know that you've seen his face pictured on placards."

Tobacco Jones paled. "By gum, Judge, I never thought of that!"

Other problems were pestering Judge Lemanuel Bates, and he gave them deep thought. Jud Malone had known his name—that meant that Malone had read the letter that Mrs Carter had sent, or else Malone had read the letter he, the judge, had sent Mrs Carter. The Carters were with the Great Central; Malone was leading the independent miners. Yet Malone had read one of those letters or else he'd never have known the judge's name. The whole thing didn't make sense.

They paid and went outside. They paused on the plank sidewalk for a moment, the judge picking his teeth and running his slow gaze over the mountain town. The sun had set behind the jagged, sawtooth peaks and the last bit of color was dropping from the sky. A cold chill rode the wind from the snowy, high glaciers.

Tobacco asked, "What's next, Judge?"

Judge Bates was tired. The long ride over the mountans, coupled with the chill and wind, had set into his bones.

"Mosey down to the hotel, I guess," he said, "and get a room. Me, I'd cotton to hit the pillow for a good night's rest. We can look up Judge Carter in the morning."

Tobacco nodded. "Reckon you're right, judge. Fifteen miles to the Grant Central mine, they said, an' that's too far to ride tonight."

They turned to walk down the street. The bullet came, then.

THE RIFLE got in one shot. Judge Bates, as he turned, caught the wink of the red powder as the rifle spat lead. The man was hiding behind the false-front of a building across the street and shooting down at them.

Tobacco Jones was walking on the inside. The bullet missed him by inches and ripped into the corner of a building, tearing the dry timber with a sibilant whisper. Then the crack of the rifle became lost in the roar of Judge Lemanuel Bates' twin .45s.

Judge Bates had fallen prone, drawing his Colts as he had gone down. Now, lying there, he emptied both weapons, the guns bucking in his cold fists. Because of the jurist's speed, the ambusher got in only one shot.

For Judge Bates' bullets were ripping through the false-front behind which he had crouched. Nor did the fat jurist send all his bullets in the same place against the building. He built a square of fire, sending bullets to the right and the left of where he had seen the rifle poke its ugly nose.

Now, too, Tobacco Jones was shooting. Gunroar smashed across the mountain town. Somewhere a man was hollering down the street. A trio of dogs, their tails tucked between their legs, took up an excited yapping.

The judge heard his hammers fall on empty cartridges. And, above the roar of Tobacco Jones' cutters, he heard the rap-rap of retreating boots, running across the roof—a man who ran swiftly, heading for the back of the building—a man still hidden by the rearing false front of the building.

Quickly the fat jurist's chubby fingers were shoving cartridges into cylinders. Tobacco Jones, too, was reloading.

"He's tryin' to get away," said Judge Bates savagely. "You circle that way, Tobacco, and I'll circle this! Come in the end of the alley and I'll come in the other end. We might be able to pinch him between us!"

Already he was hurrying through the dusk, running for the alley. From

the corner of one eye he saw Tobacco Jones running around a building, his long legs working. He skirted the end of a store and flattened himself against the back of the same building, covered by the shadows.

The shadowy distance of the alley lay barren before him. Only a litter of cans and refuse met his gaze. Gun up, he walked forward; Tobacco met him in the middle of the strip, directly behind the building where the ambusher had hidden. The postmaster's narrow forehead showed a perplexed scowl.

"He couldn't a-got away, Judge," the postmaster said. "He'd have to come out one of the ends of this alley an' he wouldn't've had time to get away from us."

Judge Bates lifted his eyes, studying the cliff that flanked one side of the alley. If the man had not come out one end of the alley he had climbed that cliff. But he had not run out of the alley and the cliff was too steep to climb.

"Maybe he's still up on the building," said Tobacco Jones.

Judge Bates moved over and studied the ground under the edge of the building's roof. He saw nothing there, so he went to the other edge. There he found what he was looking for.

A man had dropped to the ground here, a distance of about nine feet. A big box stood beside the building. That told the judge he had used the box to climb onto the roof. When he had jumped down, he had landed beside the box.

"Blood on the ground, Tobacco," the jurist murmured. "That means the ornery son has been wounded."

"He went down the alley," said Tobacco.

They followed the tracks for a short distance until they lost them in the conglomeration of other spoor and the marks of wagon tires. Nor did they see another trace of the blood. The judge stopped suddenly.

For the first time he noticed the building, set there against the upright cliff. A small log house with dark windows.

Tobacco asked, "Didn't you notice that before, judge?"

They went to the darkened building. They drew back against the cliff and studied it. Then the judge shrugged.

"We must be wrong, Tobacco. That ambusher must've beat us out of the alley. Come on."

THEY went out on the main street. Swinnerton, the hardware man, stood on the corner. He asked what the shooting had been about and the judge told him. Then the judge asked, making his voice matter-of-fact, who owned the cabin back against the cliff.

"That's Jud Malone's cabin."

The judge murmured, "Thanks," and he and Tobacco went down the street. "So that's who owns that shack, huh. . ."

"Here comes Jud Malone," said Tobacco.

They drew back hurriedly between two buildings. Malone did not see them as he went past. When he was gone, they moved forward and watched him enter the drugstore, one of the few buildings with lights.

When he came out he was carrying a package. He saw the judge and Tobacco and halted. "Howdy, men," he said. And then to Tobacco Jones, "Heard somebody just about notched you off, fellow. If you're a friend of Judge Jeremiah Carter walk light in this town, man. Sure glad they didn't hit you."

"Nice of you," said Judge Bates.

Jud Malone peered at him, trying to read his face. Then he said, "Adios," and moved into the night. Judge Bates' voice stopped him.

"How'd you know they were shooting at Tobacco, instead of me?" he asked.

Jud Malone wheeled, came up to him. "What'd you mean by that, Bates?"

Judge Bates said, quietly, "Just a thought, Malone."

"Are you sayin' I had somethin' to do with it?"

"You're the head of the local miners. They hate Judge Carter. We're friends of the judge."

Jud Malone hit straight from the

shoulder. Had he put his entire weight behind the blow he would have knocked Judge Bates flat, but he was on his toes when he hit, and the blow skidded off the fat jurist's jaw.

The blow stunned the big man. Then his left, moving in straight, smashed on Malone's jaw. The man was off balance and the fist knocked him down. He landed on his fours, spat blood, and came up again.

Judge Bates knocked him down again. Malone rolled over, the light from the building showing him clearly, his hand on his holstered gun.

"Don't pull that gun," warned Tobacco Jones.

Jud Malone looked up into the postmaster's drawn .45. He took his hand back and got to his feet. He said, "You'll pay for this, gents. Through the nose."

"Maybe," said Judge Bates.

Malone turned and walked away. The judge watched him go, his hands on his guns. The night hid the miner. Judge Bates and Tobacco went into the drugstore.

"What did Malone just buy in here?" asked the jurist.

"Some bandages and some iodine," said the clerk. "Why ask, men?"

Judge Bates glanced at Tobacco Jones. The postmaster chewed and nodded. The clerk wondered what was going on. But both of the partners knew then that Spider McCarthy had tried to kill Tobacco and one or both of them had wounded the gunman. And now Jud Malone was packing bandages and medicine to patch up his hired gunhand.

"We could raid that cabin," murmured Tobacco.

Judge Bates frowned. "No, I got a better plan." The whole thing didn't make sense: that thought pounded at his brain. But his complacent face did not betray his innermost struggle. He looked at his skinned knuckle.

"Give me a bottle of iodine," he told the clerk.

THEY went outside. Tobacco Jones bit off a chew of Star and chewed vigorously. He spat out on the street.

"Well, Judge?"

"The way I figure," said Judge Bates, "this Jud Malone fella is workin' for the Great Central Gold Mining Company, Tobacco. An' I'll tell you why I think that. Malone's tongue slipped—he disclosed that he knew our names. That means he read either my letter or Mrs Carter's."

"Then you think that Judge Carter spotted him an' Spider McCarthy to kill us, huh?"

Bates lowered his jug. "The judge ain't behin' this hell, Tobacco. If'n you knew him like I know him you wouldn't say that. No, there's somebody else behin' it."

"Then what's Judge Carter doin' out at the gold mine's camp?"

Judge Bates corked his jug. "Judge Carter, unless I miss my guess, is a prisoner—that is, if he an' his missus are still alive."

Tobacco Jones rocked his angular body back on his high heels and spat thoughtfully. "I get it," he said. "There's been some illegal deals pulled. Judge Carter took the law to himself seein' there was no sheriff or marshal. So they either kidnapped him or killed him to silence him. Of course, his wife knew the goods, also, so they picked her, too. Now what?"

"Wait till morning."

They got a double room at the hotel. Judge Bates blocked the door with a chair, pulled the shades low and locked the windows. Soon Tobacco Jones was snoring softly. The judge finally went to sleep.

Next morning they went to the courthouse, a log building. Judge Bates, clean-shaven and fresh, introduced himself to the clerk and recorder, and asked to see some of his records—those pertaining to the Great Central Gold Mining Company.

"Them records ain't for public perusal."

The judge studied the thin, rat-faced man and smiled. "You're talkin' to the wrong man, fellow," he said. "You don't know your Utah law. Look at Official Records, Volume 23, Statutes of 1894, pages 45 to 47."

The man stared. "You're a Wyomin' judge," he said.

"I know my Utah law."

"You still ain't seein' them," said the man. He had both hands under the counter. Judge Bates figured he had a shotgun or rifle hidden there. So did Tobacco Jones. The postmaster's .45 came up and levelled across the counter-top.

"Take your hands up—empty!"

The man hesitated. His tongue came out and wet his lips. He crooked his elbows out—Judge Bates waited no longer. His right hand shot across the counter, fastened around the man's stovepipe neck, and the jurist dragged him across the top.

"Damnit, Bates, I'll—"

Judge Bates twisted off the man's words. "You'll do nothing," he retorted. "You ain't got a legal leg to stand on." He carried the man to the door, lifted him bodily in the air, and threw him into the street.

The rat-faced man landed sitting-down. He got to his feet, his loose lips trembling, then, without another word, he walked down the street.

"Now where's he goin'?" asked Tobacco Jones.

Judge Bates shrugged. They went to the files and opened them. After some searching the judge found what he wanted—a long, legal-looking paper full of *whereas* and *therefore*. Judge Bates skimmed through it, found what he wanted.

"Who," he asked, "is Dudley Monson?"

Tobacco spat, missed the cuspidor, splattered tobacco juice on the side of the desk. He frowned deeply. "I've read that name. . . somewhere. Why ask, Bates?"

"This Dudley Monson owns the greater share of the Great Central."

Tobacco's memory clicked. "I got it," he said. "That circular about this Jud Malone gent! It had a bunch of aliases. You know, Dudley Monson was one, as sure as I'm alive! Hey, Jud Malone is Dudley Monson!"

JUDGE BATES grunted, shoved the printed matter back in the file and they went outside. The rat-faced recorder was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe he can cause trouble for us, Bates," said the postmaster. "You sure you stand right on that Utah law you quoted?"

"Correct, Tobacco."

Judge Bates smiled quietly; he was joshing his crochety partner. He never knew a statute in the Utah code. "That gent went only one place, Tobacco, and that was to warn Jud Malone that we was going through his records. Come up to our room an' I'll prove it."

From the room they could see Malone's shack, there in the alley. After a while, the recorder left the shack and moved forward between two buildings, coming out on the main street. Five minutes later Jud Malone and Spider McCarthy, the latter walking rather stiffly, left the shack and moved out on Main street, where they stood in front of the bank.

The judge and Tobacco went downstairs, paid for the room, and then went toward the livery-barn. They had to pass directly in front of Spider McCarthy and Jud Malone. The pair watched them covertly.

Judge Bates said, to Spider McCarthy. "You walk stiffly this morning, my friend. Have you met with a slight accident recently."

"What t'hell's it to you?"

Jud Malone cut in. "You two hellions leavin' our fair city?"

"For a while, yes. We're riding out to the Great Central headquarters and see my old friend, Judge Carter."

"Nice ride," said Malone.

"Heard that's a rough country," said the judge. "Ought to be a good country to ambush a man in, huh, Monson?"

"What're you—? Where'd you get this Monson stuff?"

Judge Bates was all apology. "A thousand pardons, Malone," he murmured. "The name slipped out all unthinkingly. But you remind me of a man I used to know. You look a lot like him. His name was Dudley Monson. By the way, I saw at the recorder's office that Dudley Monson owns a great part of Great Central. Mayhap I shall see him at the mine. No relation of yours, I suppose?"

"Never heard of him," said Malone.

Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones

went to the livery-barn, the judge toting his gallon jug. The comforting splash of the vessel's contents brought a dry feeling to his throat. While Tobacco saddled their horses the jurist tilted the crockery.

Tobacco grunted, "There musta been some loco weed seed in them hotcakes you et this mornin', Bates."

The judge corked his jug. "How come that assumption?"

"Here we have the goods on Jud Malone, an' you spill the bean pot by tellin' him all we know. Longside of that, you tell him where we're goin', to boot!"

"We never told him anything. He knew we knew all that."

Tobacco mounted. "Well, maybe so, but why tell him where we're goin'?"

The judge turned his horse. A night of rest, good feed, and a warm barn had put new life into the beast. But Judge Bates held him with a strong rein.

"Why not? He aims to follow us, anyway!"

"How's the set-up look to you, judge?"

"You add it up," said Judge Bates, "an' I'll tell you if the answer is right."

Tobacco spat. "M a l o n e 's smart—plenty smart. He controls the Great Central. His company an' the independent miners squabble. The independents don't know he owns the Great Central. So he organizes them. makes hisself their head, an' leads them to their destruction. He's makin' money out of both sides."

Judge Bates nodded. "Then what, Tobacco?"

"Well, Judge Carter probably finds this out. He buys into Great Central to get into Malone's confidence to bust the ring. Malone gets wise. Maybe Carter an' his missus are plumb dead. Malone's tough."

"Not too tough."

"But why was that guard posted out there where they'd hung this miner. Jim Hingerton?"

"They'd just finished hanging him," explained Judge Bates. "They probably saw us coming and we, not being on guard particularly, hadn't noticed them drift out in that high brush and timber. The guard had recognized us. He got kind of mixed up in his instructions. Had he worked it right, he could have taken us right peacefully into Great Central headquarters."

"But he walks out there with a rifle on us," said Tobacco.

THEY WERE in the foothills now. Scrubpine and buckbrush covered the rocky, sloping hills. They hit for the rimrock, riding the high route. A few minutes later they drew up and looked at the basin below.

The day was clear, the sun bright. A warm haze lay over the valley. And, in the bottom of the bowl, a dark ugly blot placed against greenery, was the town of Jergens Bend.

"Two riders yonderly," said the judge.

Tobacco's gaze followed his partner's index finger. But the riders were heading toward the south. Judge Bates took the field glasses from his saddlebag, adjusted them, then handed them wordlessly to Tobacco.

The postmaster squinted hard and long, then handed back the glasses. "Malone an' Spider McCarthy," he said softly. "But they ain't follerin' us, Bates, they're ridin' into the hill. An' why?"

Judge Bates uncorked his jug, drank. "You got me," he admited.

Tobacco glanced at him, smiling. "First time you ever admitted you was wrong," he said.

"First time for everything."

The pair rode into the hills and were lost. Tobacco and Judge Bates continued toward the mine, traveling the high reaches. They could see the mine ahead of them.

Dim and distant, it looked very small—just a tin-metal building that reflected the sun's sharp rays. It was still about eight miles away.

"Probably just run a few rockers," said the judge. "Though I did hear back in town that they were putting back a shaft in the mountain there. Seems as if there's only about four, five men working for the company."

"Four or five men—good gunhands

—can whip a bunch of miners any day. . . . 'Specially if the miners are lead by the gunmen's boss."

"Look!" said the judge.

Ahead, a mile or so, a thin column of smoke was rising against the still morning air. The thread of it was broken by intermittent puffs of smoke. And Judge Bates knew instantly what was going on.

"Signaling to somebody with smoke," he said. "Like the Apaches do down in Arizona." He twisted his bulk in saddle. Behind them, miles away, rose a similar blue thread of smoke, broken also into pieces.

"So that's why Malone and McCarthy didn't follow us," murmured the jurist. "They rode to a high hill and built a signal fire. Now they're telling their guards out at the mine that we're heading toward the diggings."

"Warnin' 'em," grunted Tobacco. His homely face was plainly serious. "We got a tough bunch to buck here, Judge—a brainy bunch. What's your answer?"

Judge Bates scowled deeply. Then he uncorked his jug, raised it for a long time. Wordlessly Tobacco Jones watched the whiskey go down the jurist's throat. And, as always, a chord of admiration touched the skinny postmaster. But no matter how much Bates drank he never got drunk. The judge finally lowered the jug.

He smacked his lips. "Good liquor, fine liquor."

"Your belly," said Tobacco, "will get your hide filled full of bullet holes."

JUDGE BATES came back to the matter at hand. "They've got us spotted, Tobacco. Seems to me there's only one thing to do. If we go down on the level ground, them guards ahead will ride down on us. But we might outwit them."

"And how do that?"

"Ride straight ahead. Then, about a mile or so this side of the signal smoke, duck into a gulley like we aim to ride down on the level country. Only we leave our horses hidden and go ahead on foot. That way, the brush'll hide us. We'll sneak up and see what's what?"

Tobacco chewed, considered. "If'n we wanta see the judge," he finally said, "it looks like that's the play."

They rode on, seemingly unconcerned. Then, with the judge leading the way, they turned down into a gulley, tied their horses. They took rifles from saddleboots and went ahead on foot.

The mine was almost below them now. They could see the metal building clearly; beyond it a tunnel ran into the mountain, its mouth black and ominous. A powder house, built into the hill, was some distance from the tunnel. A few miners were running sluice boxes in the creek.

They were above the spot where the signal had been sent. Below them, hunkered beside the sandrocks, were two miners, about a hundred yards away. The signal fire had been extinguished. The judge and Tobacco crouched in the brush, studying the scene below.

"Okay," said the judge, "let's pay them a visit."

They got on their feet, moved forward in the high buckbrush. Suddenly, the judge heard the sound of boots sliding behind him. He thought, at first, that Tobacco had slipped in the shale. He turned, intending to steady the postmaster.

But instead, he glimpsed a swinging club. The blow whacked him across the skull, staggering him. A blurred bit of action ran across his dazed eyes. The club was coming down again, and he tried to duck. He glimpsed the man behind it—a heavy-set miner, striking hard.

He realized, dimly, that he had not outwitted the Malone men—they had outfoxed him. While two had sat below, seemingly unconcerned, others had taken to the brush and waylaid them. He took this thought with him into the darkness.

And, somewhere in the distance, he heard a man yell, "Hey, the skinny gent's gettin away—he's runnin'!. . .

A rifle roared just as the darkness claimed him.

THE WORLD was a black bottomless void and it should have been daylight. Judge Lemanuel Bates stirred and closed his eyes again. He lay there for some time, life coming slowly back into his heavy body. Dull pain pulled and tugged across his aching head. He slowly opened his eyes again.

A voice asked, "How do you feel, Judge Bates?"

Judge Jeremiah Carter knelt beside him.

"It's getting dark," murmured Judge Bates.

Carter said, "Close your eyes and lie back." Judge Lemanuel Bates did and he felt the cool touch of cold water across his aching face. Suddenly a great fear ran through him.

"Where's Tobacco Jones?" he demanded.

He was wide-awake now, sitting up. He saw he was on the floor in a darkened cabin that had only one high window and that a very small one. Judge Jeremiah Carter, his thin lips and high cheekbones covered by a week's whiskers, knelt beside him, his gray-green eyes showing worry. And seated on a chair in the far corner, her gray head covered by her hands, was Mrs. Carter, sobbing and crying softly.

"Tobacco got away," said Judge Carter.

Memory had returned to Judge Lemanuel Bates. The bitter scene enacted back on the mountain swept across him clearly. So Tobacco Jones had escaped the ambush. . . .

"Who took me here?"

"Jud Malone and his gunmen. That was about three hours ago. I thought you were dead at first."

Mrs. Carter lifted her head. She was a plump, heavy-set woman, short and stout, with a kindly, motherly face.

"I'll never forgive myself, Judge Bates. I got you into this by mailing you that letter asking you to come over for a fishing trip—But we never received word from you saying you would come."

"That was because Malone intercepted my letter," clarified the judge. "Wonder where my jug is?"

"Malone has it," said Judge Jeremiah Carter.

Judge Bates grinned ruefully. "I sure could stand a snort." He got slowly to his feet; his knees were weak. He walked uncertainly to a homemade chair and sat down, the rawhide seat protesting against his great weight. For the first time he discovered that his head was bandaged.

"I did that," said Judge Carter. "You must have a head made of cast-iron and whalebone, Bates. It's a wonder they didn't kill you."

"Wonder where Tobacco is?"

"They looked for him, I guess, but he got on his horse and got away. He killed one of the ambushers. I guess he must be all right; he couldn't have moved that fast if he'd been wounded."

"That's a break for us," said Judge Bates.

"I suppose you wonder what this is all about?" asked Judge Carter.

Judge Lemanuel Bates told him what he and Tobacco had learned in Jergens Bend by cruel experience and at the clerk-and-recorder's office. And, from what Judge Carter said, Bates and the postmaster had reached the right conclusion to the problem. Mrs. Carter clarified the letter received by Judge Bates.

"At first, Jeremiah didn't want me to appeal for your aid, Judge Bates. So, unknown to him, I mailed that letter. Jeremiah told me that when you and he were in college you once made an agreement to help the other if he needed aid."

Judge Lemanuel Bates scowled. "I forgot that," he admitted. He put his throbbing brain at the matter at hand and suddenly he remembered. "Now why didn't I remember that before? Sure, when one of us needed the other we promised to write a letter asking the other to come over for a fishing trip."

"We made that promise one day in practice court," said Judge Carter.

Judge Bates grinned. "Now I should've remembered that," he admonished himself. "Had I done that it would have made Tobacco and me come armed and ready for trouble. I

reckon Jud Malone made you folks prisoners right after Mrs. Carter mailed the letter to me, huh?"

JUDGE CARTER walked to the wall. There he had marked the passage of days by making a fingernail mark against the thick green logs. He counted these marks now and said he and his wife had been prisoners a day over a week.

"What do they intend to do with us?" asked Judge Bates.

"I don't know," confessed Judge Carter. "I think Malone is afraid to kill us because if he does and the local people hear about it, the whole country will be up on the warpath against him and he'll never get out of Utah alive."

"Then what's the answer?" asked Judge Bates.

"Jud Malone has taken a lot of gold out of this soil," said Judge Carter. "I think he has just about milked the country dry of gold. He's robbed plenty of miners, killing them to silence them, and laying the blame on me. I've heard a bit of conversation now and then, and I think he and Spider McCarthy are about ready to leave the country."

"Where does that leave us?" asked Judge Bates.

Judge Carter shrugged. "I really don't know." He paced the pine floor, his long legs taking great strides. "If we only had a weapon of some sort, Bates."

"If—" said Judge Bates.

Their only hope, the judge knew, lay in Tobacco Jones. And Tobacco, out there in the brush, was only a lone man, facing a gang of murderous killers and thugs. Judge Bates felt unrest for the safety of his postmaster partner.

"They have about six miners working," continued Judge Carter. "The creek has almost played out and they have a few sluice boxes working. The rest of the gold is back in the shaft."

Judge Bates nodded soberly.

"They work back there. Usually one man is posted at the entrance as a guard. The cook is always outside, of course, in the cook shack. Believe it or not, Bates, they've hit a pocket of nuggets back there—a thing almost unheard of in mineralogy."

Judge Bates tried desperately to remember some of his college geology. "Probably a pocket of loose gold caught years ago in a fault," he murmured. "Somebody's coming, Carter."

Boots were rattling in the gravel outside. Judge Bates listened closely as the men paused at the door. He heard a key turn in an outside lock, heard the hasp move back and free the door that swung inward and admitted Jud Malone and Spider McCarthy. They came just inside the door, their short-guns in their hands, and stood and looked at the three.

"Quite a collection of legal talent," said Jud Malone. "Well, men, how goes the brain work today, huh? Still thinking out a way to get Jud Malone behind the bars, Bates?"

"You'll never get behind bars," said the judge. "You'll get crammed into a pine box and weighted down with a couple of tons of sod."

Jud Malone smiled crookedly, his gray-green eyes pulled together. He looked at them for some time, and Judge Lemanuel Bates tried to read behind the heavy man's thoughts. Spider McCarthy leaned against the wall, seeingly loafing but the judge saw that his thin fingers were tight around the black handles of his drawn .45s.

"Well, Jud?" asked Spider McCarthy.

"We got to get this postmaster," said Jud Malone suddenly. He turned and went out with Spider McCarthy following him and Judge Bates heard the door-hasp slide into place, heard the dull click of the lock closing. The boots moved off and finally their sounds had died.

"Wonder where Tobacco is?" asked Judge Carter.

Judge Bates tried to swallow but his throat was too dry. With pangs he thought of his jug and anger riled him. Even now Jud Malone and Spider McCarthy were probably tilting the gallon crockery, and liquor meant for Judge Bates' judicial throat was running down the thirsty gullets of the outlaws. It was enough, he decided, to make a man sign the pledge.

There was some luke-warm water in a rusty pail. The taste was nauseating to the judge's tongue.

THE DAY wore on and a fly droned listlessly. Mrs Carter slept on the cot and Judge Jeremiah Carter scratched his bewhiskered jaw and scowled. Despite his easy exterior a number of galling thoughts rubbed at Judge Lemanuel Bates. Chief of these was anxiety for his lanky partner. But that anxiety was settled late that afternoon when again they heard the scuffle of boots outside.

The key grated. The hasp flew back. Tobacco Jones, one eye swollen shut, was pushed into the room, stumbling and falling to the floor. Jud Malone's saturnine face showed a crooked grin and Spider McCarthy's eyes were emotionless.

"Here's your partner, B a t es," growled Jud Malone. "Foun' him snoopin' aroun' an' we worked him over some. Hope this finds you gents and the lady comfortable. What're you talkin' about? One of your legal victories, I suppose?"

Nobody answered.

Malone and his bodyguard turned and left. Again, the hasp shot into place, the lock clicked. Judge Bates knelt beside Tobacco Jones. They had evidently pistol-whipped his partner. But, despite the black eye and the blood on his scalp, the postmaster had a crooked smile on his thin lips.

"I'll kill them hellions," he declared.

Judge Bates studied the scalp wound. "Cut you with a gun-barrel, it looks like. We'll wash it out with water and tie something around it. How come they get you, Tobacco?"

"Tried to sneak up and free you people. They jumped me in the brush. Guess I should've waited until dark."

Mrs Carter tore the piece from a blanket on the bed. The judge bound his partner's wound. The blanket made a cumbersome bandage. Judge Jeremiah Carter paced the floor angrily.

"We got to get out, Bates!"

"How?"

Tobacco grinned. "I forgot to tell you somethin', Bates. Before they beat me up I was in the blacksmith shop." He dug down in his pants under his belt. Judge Lemanuel Bates grunted appreciatingly as the postmaster's grimy hand came up holding a keyhole saw. "I got it hid under my pants before they found me. They searched me before they threw me in here but they didn't do a good job."

"We'll saw the lock off," said Judge Lemanuel Bates.

"But we need guns," said Judge Carter.

"The main thing," declared Judge Bates, "is to get out of here, Carter. Get Mrs Carter to safety and we'll run these killers into their graves. If we can't get arms to fight them with, we can at least make a getaway and bring in help."

Judge Carter looked at the keyhole saw. "You have to get a hole through the wood before you can use a saw like this. What can we make the hole with?"

Judge Bates went to the door, Tobacco following with the saw. Mrs Carter sat on the bunk and watched and hoped. Judge Carter's breath was hot on Judge Bates' neck. The judge ran his glance over the door and his hopes sank suddenly.

The door was made of heavy two-inch planks planed and set firmly together. Judge Bates leaned down and studied a crack. The planks were jointed together smoothly but he detected a trace of light between them at one point.

"Somebody watch out the window," he ordered.

They pulled the bunk under the window. Tobacco could just peer out the corner. With difficulty the judge got the saw blade between the crack.

"Nobody in sight," said Tobacco.

Judge Bates sawed hurriedly. His only hope was to widen the crack so he could turn the saw and saw in a circle. The work was, of necessity, slow. The saw ran back and forth the judge slowly tilting the blade.

"Danged saw sure is dull," grunted Judge Bates.

"Let me work at it," said Carter.

The lanky jurist went to work

religiously. Suddenly Tobacco Jones' sibilant whisper cut the air.

"Malone—Comin' this way!"

Judge Carter pulled the saw out. Judge Bates waited, breathing heavily. If Malone came he could see where the saw had widened the crack. . . .

"He went into the mine shaft," said Tobacco.

JUDGE CARTER wiped his high forehead. Mrs Carter breathed a sigh of relief; Judge Bates went back to work. Finally he got the hole big enough to start the saw cutting on the circle.

The planks were dry and tough, the saw dull. Diligently the fat jurist worked, his muscles complaining; when he tired Judge Jeremiah Carter took over.

"I'm gettin' tired of stretchin' my neck," grunted Tobacco, chewing vigorously. "Ain't you gents got no luck—"

"We're free," said Judge Bates.

He had sawed a tight circle around the lock. Now all he need do was pull the door and it would open. He outlined their plan of procedure rapidly. Mrs Carter, for safety, would, as soon as she was outside, go instantly into the brush and hide.

"What have you seen?" asked Judge Bates of Tobacco.

"'Pears to me, Bates," said the gaunt man, "that everybody—includin' Jud Malone an' Spider McCarthy—are in yonder tunnel. They's one gent in the rush—right there beside the mine shaft. He can't see us 'cause the shack is betwixt us an' him."

"Anybody else?"

"The cook, in the cook-house."

"I'll take the guard," said the judge. "You take the cook, Tobacco. Judge Carter, you stay with your missus—"

"Not me, Bates. I'm going with you."

Judge Bates smiled. "All right."

He pulled the door open and they ran out. Heavy buckbrush lined the bottom of the canyon and they went into this. Here ran tumbling, noisy Grub creek and here they left Mrs. Carter. The woman's motherly face showed her inner fear.

"Dad, you be careful now; promise me?"

"That I will, mother," said Judge Jeremiah Carter solemnly. "It is not good when men gather together to use their strength outside of the pale of the law as we are going to do. But to bring about justice sometimes we are forced to break the laws of man and dwell by those of the Supreme Being."

Tobacco said, "I'm takin' the cook," and went through the brush. Soon he was lost in the high buckbrush. And then the two judges moved forward toward the guard. They could see him squatted there with his rifle in front of the dark maw of the mine. A few moments later they halted in the brush behind him and looked out on him. Finally Judge Lemanuel Bates had his plan.

"Get over there, Judge Carter," he said, "behind those bushes." A broken limb from a cottonwood tree lay on the ground. "Take that as a club." He outlined the rest in sparse small words.

The foliage was so thick he could hardly see the judge, despite the fact he knew where he was hidden. Another broken bough lay close at hand and he tested its heft. Then he moved to the edge of the brush and hid.

Judge Jeremiah Carter tossed a rock into the clearing. It landed feet away from the guard. He came hurriedly to his feet, his rifle raised, and he looked at the rock. Then he lifted his gaze to the side of the overtowering mountain. Evidently he thought the rock had rolled from there.

Judge Carter said, "Woof, woof," and Judge Lemanuel Bates smiled. The sound was that of a puppy in pain and had the judge not known, it would have fooled him. The guard scowled and walked into the brush.

JUDGE BATES' club whammed across his skull. But the bough had a rotten spot, and it broke as the guard lurched ahead. The man was stunned but not out; he was turning. Then Judge Carter's club came in

hard and knocked the man flat. Judge Carter balanced his weight on him.

"Get his guns, Bates."

The guard had dropped his rifle. Judge Bates, grunting, picked it from the ground, took the man's two Colts. He tossed the rifle to Judge Carter. Both men stared as Tobacco Jones came from the cookshack, a butcherknife in one hand. And the tip of the butcherknife was bedded against the cook's back.

The cook was a fat, waddling man and he was sweating. Judge Bates' grin widened as he saw the man was gagged with a wet dishtowel. The cook's face was mauled some, and his nose was bloody.

Tobacco had a handful of dishtowels. Using these they bound the cook and the limp guard hand and foot and fashioned a gag on the guard. The place was quiet when they straightened.

"Get a crowbar, Tobacco," said Judge Bates. "Tear the lock off the powder house. Be sure and get some fuse."

Judge Carter went with the postmaster. A narrow railroad, using inch pipe for rails, ran into the tunnel. A hand-made ore car sat beside the mountain. Judge Bates picked the car up and set it on the track.

When Tobacco came up with a few sticks of dynamite wrapped in a tarp the judge had things ready to move. He had placed some boulders on the car and now he covered these with the tarp. He took the fuse and weaved it under the canvas.

"Don't need the dynamite," he said.

"But—" began Tobacco.

Judge Carter thought. "I see," he said.

A length of pipe ran into the tunnel. Probably at one time water had been run into the shaft. Judge Lemanuel Bates placed his mouth close to the hollow steel pipe. His words carried easily to its length in the mountain.

"This is Judge Lemanuel Bates speaking," he hollered. "We got the place spiked with guns. Come on out, you men, and come out with your hands high!"

The words echoed through the pipe, and all sound died. Then from inside the shaft they heard a raise of voices. And then, holding the other voices silent, came the words of Jud Malone.

"What is this, a joke, guard?"

"No joke about it," said the judge. "Your guard is knocked out, Malone. Come on out and face the music."

Silence. Then, "Drive us out."

"We'll do that," said Judge Bates. "We're sending in a car loaded with dynamite. We'll blow you out of there. Here it comes!"

Judge Carter had lighted the fuse. The stem sparkled and spat sparks as Tobacco Jones gave the car a strong push. The little ore car zipped into the shaft and they saw the sparks sputtering as it rolled ahead. Then it rounded a corner and they saw it no longer.

They ran back to the brush, rifle and six shooters ready, and they settled there and waited. They did not have to wait long. For the inside of the tunnel was filled with wild voices and wild commotion.

"Get outa here!"

"That dynamite explode an'—"

"I'm comin' out, Bates, with my hands high!"

MAD WITH fear, they ran out of the shaft—six miners with Jud Malone and Spider McCarthy in the lead. The miners had their hands raised high and ran in wild fear; but Malone and his gunmen had their six-shooters out. They had the gallows staring at them hungrily and they would go out fighting.

Malone's gun spewed lead over Judge Bates. The obese jurist had gone into a crouch, his short-gun talking rapidly. Malone shot again but already Judge Bates' bullets had turned him, swinging his aim wide.

Malone went down—and stayed down.

Spider McCarthy, too, was down—sitting bent double, coughing horribly and gasping. Judge Bates glanced sidewise at Judge Carter. The lanky man's rifle was trailing smoke from its long barrel.

(Continued On Page 96)

HELL-ON-WHEELS McMANUS
AND THE MEAN-EYED LADINA

A RIP-SNORTER

By Joe Austell Small

(Author of "Me and the Devil," "Bronc-Busting Gobbler," Etc.)

It was a red-letter day in Bung Hole history when McManus tackled that ladina known as Mrs Hell!

THE MAN IN THE cream-colored silk shirt grins widely. He's acting like he has a secret and is about to be kind enough to let us in on it. He says:

"A man could turn the pockets of every cow camp this side o' Cape Cod, and he couldn't find a cow hand up to tightenin' my saddle girt when it comes to that special job, mister! I'm the best one-swing brush-cow snagger in the state of Texas. Where'bouts do I start to work?"

Old "Plague-gone" Watson, boss of the Bung Hole spread, looks at the slim cowpuncher from under shaggy eyebrows. He jerks a wild hair from tobacco-stained mustache and rubs the spot with a sun-cracked fist to quiet the sting. "Yuh can lay it 'roun' their necks every pop, eh? Know anythin' about brandin' wild cattle in the brush?"

"Do I know anythin' about brandin' cattle?" The tall cowpoke looks at us like he feels sorry for the boss —old Plague-gone not having heard about a brander like what's standing before him now. "Why, Mr. Watson," the man says serious, "I'm so fast at brandin' cattle that I don't have to heat the iron but once for every twelve cows! I can hang a sign on the critters so quick the iron don't have time to burn their hide

before I take it away! Cows plumb like it. I've even had 'em to line up, waitin' their turn to be branded! Do I know anything about brandin' cattle!" He grunts and jerks his head back like the question's too ridiculous to talk about any more.

"Them old brush cattle we're chousin' now aire pretty rough." Shovelnose Skaggs offers, looking at that glitter on the puncher's boots and the don't-give-a-darn angle of his gray Stetson hat.

"Lood, Grandpa," the waddie says in a patient voice. "I've worked cattle from California to the piny woods of East Texas, from Montana's wide ranges to the sluggish Rio Grande, and now you mention chousin' out an' brandin' cattle in the Texas brush as bein' rough! Why, man, I come down here for a vacation! You ought to try herdin' buffalo on the Little Big Horn sometime! You fellows down here ain't dry behind the ears when it comes to rough cattle work!"

"We're short handed," the boss says. "And we're in our rush season. I'll give you a try. Beanpole Dinwiddie there'll show you the ropes." He nods toward me. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Winston S. McManus," the puncher says. "They gener'ly call me Win."

Mighty-tired Miller chuckles and throws out a wad of chewed twist. "From what you say, cowboy," he grins slow, "you're the sort of hell-on-wheels puncher we need around here to lay the twine on that old mean-eyed longhorn ladina we call Mrs. Hell. She's a slick'un if ever I laid eyeballs on one!"

"Show me her hangout," Win McManus says with an easy smile, "an she'll be wearin' the sign on her hip come tomorrow!"

"We'll show yuh, all right," old Mighty-tired grins. He winks at me. "We'll danged shore show yuh!"

WE FIND that shelly, mealy-nosed old Spanish longhorn cow next day quicker'n I figure we will. She's bogged to her belly in a soap-hole sink on the edge of the Panther Branch Thicket. She's come out of her thicket stomping grounds to graze on the green grass shoots that have sprung up in the little glades after a few light showers.

It never fails! I say to myself. *Here we've tried to lay the hemp on that old ladina for goin' on six months and can't do it. Then this blow-hard says his piece, and the first day he's out to smoke her, the play works right into his hands. It never fails!*

Win McManus pulls his big cottonseed gray to a halt and eyes the old critter appraisingly. "Weak lookin' old devil, ain't she?" he comments.

"She's wore herself down tryin' to pull out of that bog," I say quick. "That's the cow we're looking for."

"You mean that's Mrs. Hell!" Win McManus looks at me, eyes showing unbelief. He holds back his head and laughs then. "I thought," the gangling puncher says, "that you was goin' to show me a tough proposition! This poor old cow looks too weak to stand on her feet and walk!"

I'm a little plegged at that. "She ain't in her best form right now, seein' as how she's fought that bog so long," I explain.

The old cow does look weak all right. If we hadn't happened up on the old critter, the wolves'd fed hearty on her come nightfall.

"This is," the puncher says with a chuckle, "the easiest ten bucks I've ever made in my life!"

THE BOYS have bet McManus a ten leaf that he won't have the sign on that old cow inside of two weeks. He's taken them up and talked a heap about just how quick he'd do it.

After he'd walked on into the ranch house to see the boss about something, Shovelnose Skaggs grinned and said: "You know, boys, I believe that ravel-tongue feller would brag a little if we'd crowd him!"

From then on the boys call Win McManus "Ravel-tongue" what time

they don't refer to him as "Hell-on-Wheels."

I climb down off old Nearly Dead, my nag, walk over to the shade of a stooped oak, and lean back against the bole. It's a plumb shame, I'm thinking, to take advantage of the old cow at a weak moment like this. I know Rave-tongue aims to brand her on the spot.

The big cowboy shakes out a loop and tosses it at the old cow with a careless swing. But her horns are long. The loop hooks across one of them and slides off. Ravel-tongue's lariat gets muddy as he drags it back in. He frowns a little and cuts his eye over toward me to see if I've seen his miss. I'm smiling like a jackass eating briars.

The waddie builds another loop quick and takes pains to see that it goes over both horns. Ravel-tongue takes a couple of twists around his saddle horn with the knot end of his catch rope then and feeds the steel to his nag. The big gray lays his belly to the ground, grunts, and the rope starts popping.

When the stretch on her neck begins to hurt, the old cow hawls and starts working herself. She hasn't been in long enough for the mud to set. So with a couple of hard pulls, that big gray walks away with the old cow sliding behind like dragging a dead catfish out of the old creek hole.

Ravel-tongue throws me a victorious look and climbs down off his nag like the whole thing is pretty monotonous. He stands there awhile, hands on his hips. He talks to himself then, loud enough to be sure I hear it.

"So this is the famous Mrs. Hell —the wild-eyed buggar of the deep brush!" he says. "Huh! She's even too yaller to get up on her feet and walk! These 'pokes down here must a'been weaned on sugar-teats to think an old stove-up heifer like that is tough!"

He takes the rope off her horns then. The old cow's laying on her side, breathing hard, and walling her eyes. "I'm gonna get the old scallawag on her feet," Ravel-tongue explains, "then rope and tie her up for brandin'. Want to do it legal. Throw me a little fire together, there, willyuh? Two weeks!" He grins confident. "Sonofagun! Wish I'd bet 'em double I could a' done it in two hours!"

I'm plumb down at the mouth. I didn't think that even a guy like Ravel-tongue McManus would take advantage of a bet like that. But it is legal and there's not a thing I can do about it.

"Maybe what you 'pokes need down here is a few lessons on how to work cattle!" he continues. "Maybe the boss will hire me to sort of teach you poor punchers somethin' about handlin' cattle!" He gives me a sort of sneering grin and lays a hand on the old cow's horns to help her up. She don't budge. He tries some more. It don't do any good. "Stubborn old heifer, eh?" Ravel-tongue says, getting a little riled. "Well, I've got a cure for that!"

THE GANGLING 'poke changes ends, throws a twist in her tail, kicks the old cow in the rump, hollers loud and gives a mighty yank.

This gets results all right but it's a mistake. The old cow comes up, staggers a time or two and then gets the feel of her feet under her again. She's trembling all over and there's a sort of rumbling sound coming out of her throat. The old ladina seems to take spirit then. She wheels with a bawl, lowers her horns, and starts craving to meet the loud-talking waddie in the shiny boots and the pretty white goat-skin chaps.

Ravel-tongue's under jaw sags. He sidesteps the old hussy but she wheels quick. Her dander's up and she aims to brush it back down with a hunk of the 'poke's pants on her horns. I pearten up quick like. *That blamed old cow's got a lot of bottom yet!* I say in my mind.

The tall 'poke heads for his cayuse then. He never makes it. That old cow gathers him up on her horns and gives the scared waddie a heave like pitching hay up in the loft. Ravel-tongue lands flat on his

belly in the same mud hole he's just drug the cow out of.

About the time her horns meet the 'poke's pants, I rise to my feet and start toward the fracas. I don't aim to plumb let her kill the big blow-hard, even if he has got it coming.

When Ravel-tongue hits mud, the old cow stops. She don't aim to get back into the same trap. She looks around then and hangs a mean eye on me. She wheels quick. I halt fast and stand there feeling as guilty as a hound dog caught in the smokehouse. I start backing up slow then and smile like I ain't been trying to horn in at'tall but am just walking around to see the scenery. That old cow knows better though. She bellers low. I wheel and run. She drops her horns and aims them for a spot half-way between my head and my heels.

That old cow is mortally rattling her hocks when I get back to the leaning scrub oak tree. One of her big horns follows the seat of my pants up the trunk of that tree for three yards, blasting off bark as it goes. But I reach the first limb all in one piece. I hang a leg over it and sigh thankful. I look down then at the gally old critter. She's hooking both our hosses into a stampede. They're quitting the country, heading for home in a spooked run. They're snorting and holding their heads sideways to keep from stepping on the bridle reins.

The old cow quits them then. She turns back with her tail in the air, ready to lock horns with me or Ravel-tongue if we get itchy feet.

HELL-ON-WHEELS McManus is standing in mud and water up to his arm pits. The old cow's standing there on the edge of the sink, sniffing and bellering and shaking her long horns. She paws mud on her back like a young bull in the springtime. By the look on his face, I can tell that Ravel-tongue knows what the old cow's got in mind for him if he quits that bog-hold. A blind dog could see that.

Just to make sure that I understand how she regards my hand in the matter, the old ladina starts dividing her time between that bog hole and the tree I'm up. She's ready to hang my hide on a horn in a second flat if I quit my perch. Every time either one moves a peg, that old cow wheels and heads for us with a beller of rage.

Ravel-tongue loses his surprise and starts getting mad then. He cusses the old ladina 'till a gnat wouldn't light on her. He thinks up fourteen kinds of slow death for the old scogie's benefit, come his deliverance. He'd shoot the old cow but the only guns we brought along on this trip are in their saddle scabbards going home right now. So Ravel-tongue just stands there cussing, helpless as a grass-hopper in a turkey drive.

He starts throwing mud at her then. The old cow shakes her horns at the waddie and makes a little forward run like she aims to pile off in the bog hole after him. The 'poke dodges, then looks at me with a sly grin like he knowed she didn't aim to carry out her threat all along.

THE MOON'S rose and the hoot owls are hollering mournful when that old scallawag finally calls off her dogs and heads back into Panther Branch Thicket. I'm so numb from sitting in that tree that I can't move a joint without the help of my hands.

When I get down and turn toward the sink-hole, I see Ravel-tongue coming out of it on his hands and knees. He drags up on the bank, rises with a grunt and stands there awhile looking back where he's spun so many lonely thoughts. The 'poke's had to leave his boots stuck solid in the bottom of that mud-hole. He'll have to come back and spade 'em out tomorrow. His goat-hide chaps are sagging strips of black slush. Water's running off the strings of hair. The pretty silk shirt is flabby and a stained mess. Hell-on-Wheels McManus turned a mud-speckled face to me then and says: "Darned old heifer took advantage of me! Wait'll I meet her next time!"

"I'll wait," I say and start the long walk home.

Ravel-tongue is leaving bloody tracks on the prairie when the boys meet us about half way in. They figured we'd run into some trouble and had started out after supper to look for us. They pull up and stare at me and Ravel-tongue for awhile, too flabbergasted to say a word. The moonlight's most bright as day. Hell-on-Wheels McManus just stands there looking back at the boys, shivering a little in the cold night air. The 'poke 'pears like he's just finished up in a dog fight where he drug off second prize.

"How," Mighty-tired Miller asks, hanging a smile on his face and looking at Ravel-tongue with a twinkle in his eye, "is Mrs. Hell today?"

"Yeah," Shovelnose Skaggs chimes in. "Is the old heifer sportin' a burn on her hip yet?"

"I stumbled and fell in a mud hole," Hell-on-Wheels McManus glances at me with a pleading look in his eyes. "We're shore hungry, boys," he changes the subject quick. "How 'bout a lift home?"

TWO DAYS later Ravel-tongue is ready to try that old cow again. The boys have been snapping at the proud flesh on his collar bone like a bunch of hungry wolves. He's getting as nervous and jumpy as a buck deer in a panther's den.

But he's kept up his big talk. The boys finally make him break down and tell what happened, but he says it was just a little slip-up, a mean stab-in-the-back by the old cow when he wasn't looking. All he wants, the waddie declares, is just one more sight of the old brush-popper. She'll wear the sign away from that ruckus when the dust clears, Ravel-tongue promises.

"Guess we better brand that old cow today," the waddie says. Ravel-tongue tried to make his voice sound plumb confident, but the look on his face is about like that of a beat-up prisoner who's just listened to a judge pronounce hang-noose justice on him for a back-stabbing murder.

Again the windy puncher's in luck. After a couple hours' hunt, we chouse that old cow out of the brush. She heads up a shallow draw and into a steep-banked gully. The old cow knows she's made an error soon as she makes the first turn and finds out she's hit a blind gully. The old hussy wheels and starts back, stops in her tracks when she sees that we've hemmed her in. The old cow's shaking her head, raking dirt on her back and blowing her nose like a bee's lodged in it.

Ravel-tongue's gray won't go into that gully after her. The nag snorts, rolls his eyes and falls apart. He's met that cow before and the big gray ain't anxious to renew their acquaintance.

The 'poke cusses his cayuse a little, swings down out of the saddle and looks for something to tie the nag to. He ain't taking any more chances of walking home like he did the last time.

At the mouth of the gully there's a little open glade with a dead post oak sapling standing in the center, like it's growed there to tie to. Ravel-tongue stakes the nag to this sapling with the full length of his catch rope. If the cow does run at him, the 'poke wants to give his mount plenty of slack to dodge in. At the same time he wants something stronger than a bridle to hold his hoss put through the excitement to follow.

I pull out to a safe distance and watch the show. I'm not supposed to lend a hand in any way on this little job—not even hold the 'poke's hoss while he works. Seems to me like he's going at the thing pretty reckless, but I don't let on none. I guess he figures the old cow'll be twice as hard to rope if she ever gets back in the brush again. But just tha same, I never did like to work cattle without a horse.

THAT OLD longhorn hussy sure 'nuf looks mean to me. Right now it 'pears to me like if she's ever

laid eyes on a booger, she don't recognize it. She ain't hanging out no welcome sign for nobody. She wants to be left alone and she's hinting it strong. The old cow's splashed with the colors of black mud, mustard and mouse. She's got a wild eye, and both horns set for hooking. One look at the actions caused by her present frame of mind and I know Old Man Trouble has made our acquaintance. He's hung a mean elbow on the old hitch rail and he aims to memorize our address.

Ravel-tongue borrows my catch rope and starts toward that old cow, loop built and ready. She starts backing up. "See," he turns his head toward me and smiles weak. "She ain't so tough!" He goes on in after her then.

One thing about that old cow. She don't hunt trouble. She's afraid of a rope and as long as a man'll let her alone, she won't bother him. But she don't stand no monkeying with.

Ravel-tongue disappears around that bend with his rope swinging. He's figuring on hemming the old cow up and laying the twine on her as she rushes by him on her way out. But Mrs. Hell has got different ideas. I hear a sort of bellering snort and a sharp exclamation from Ravel-tongue. Then he busts out of that blind gully like a swarm of bees is on his tail. The poke's tracks don't have a chance to cool much before that old cow's in them. Her expression ain't friendly. She's got her horns lowered and aimed at the seat of Ravel-tongue's pants. She's bawling a little and blowing her nose.

The running 'poke looks pretty boogered all right. He's a little excited too and so forgets to untie his hoss before riding away. Ravel-tongue takes one leap for the saddle when he nears the shying gray and is riding hard when he straddles it.

"Giddayup!" he says, not thinking as how he's already riding full speed.

The big nag has already seen what's hurrying his rider and in two jumps he's stretched out.

The saddle girt busts when that running gray hits the end of the stake rope. The horse turns a wildcat. It don't hurt him none though. Ravel-tongue slides through a patch of milk weed and grass burrs, using his head for an opening wedge. He hits a couple of rises in the ground that rattle his teeth and finally comes to a jolting stop.

He looks up in time to see the big gray stacking the scenery behind him. The top of that dead sapling has snapped off and the boogered hoss is dragging it out of the country. Ravel-tongue also sees that old mean-eyed ladina coming for him with horns lowered and hoofs pounding.

THE 'POKE rises without even touching his feet to the ground, looks like, and busts a hole through the milkweed growth that even a bear could walk through. "Git out of here, you old devil!" Ravel-tongue throws back over his shoulder. But he don't take time to look back and see if she minds him.

For a man as stove-up as Ravel-tongue is from his last run-in with that old cow, he's throwing on a batch of speed that's surprising. He's passing by the scattering tree growth in the little glade so fast they look like a picket fence. He's run by six or eight before he recollects to climb one. Ravel-tongue can't remember how he makes it to the top of that post oak tree, unless he runs right up the straight trunk.

All this time I've been following the race, sort of hoping I won't catch up and at the same time afraid not to. I know if that old cow ever gets a horn into the 'poke, there won't be enough of him left to scrape up with a hoe.

When the old cow sees the waddie has beat her to a tree, she wheels and makes a run at my horse. He's going full speed and what that nag does so sudden I've never been able to figure out. Anyhow, I'm riding dry air quick like and looking for a spot to land on.

I don't know whether a man could say I land and take off or just bounce. I see the old cow heading my way and I knock a batch of dust into the old critter's eyes as my feet leave that particular spot. The old scogie's horns ain't far behind that little bag the air is making in the seat of my pants when I finally dodge behind a big black-jack and fair scatter the bark in an honest try at flying straight up.

IT'S SLAP dark again when that satanic old heifer gives up patrolling the ground between our two trees and idles off into the woods with a disappointed sort of grumbling noise in her throat.

Our boots are full of blisters when we drag in at the ranch house that night. I'm ringy as a sore-backed hoss. Ravel-tongue looks like he's been tromped on by an irritated grizzly. The boys have a right smart of fun out of Ravel-tongue that night. They peel the skin off his sore back in strips the size of pigging string.

It's pretty nigh unbearable for Hell-on-Wheels McManus the next few days around there. He can't stomach the thought of another run-in with that old cow for a few days. The boys are laying it on thick. Their stories about Ravel-tongue and the old mean-eyed ladina get stronger as the hours go by and the old cow continues to roam the thicket without a brand on her hip.

When we hit Panther Branch Thicket for the third time, I know it's do or die for Hell-on-Wheels McManus. He's got his chin pushed out like he's trying to bust the skin off it and there's a reckless look in his eyes. He's made his brag and this time he's got to deliver.

It takes us nearly two days this time to locate that old cow. She's rattled her hocks back into the remotest part of the big thicket. She don't like this rope-slinging waddie that's on her trail and she aims to stay out of his reach.

But we run upon the old scogie about mid-afternoon on the second day. Ravel-tongue's been feeding hisself a lot of talk about what he's gonna do to the old sister this time and he's mighty near got back his confidence again.

I don't like the old cow's actions this time. These wild brush cattle generally flush scared and make a break for the deep woods. This old cow don't act that way this time. The old ladina runs a little ways, stops, snorts and paws the ground. She holds her head high in the air, shakes them big horns and looks meanful at us. It's like she's worrying about which is the sure-death spot to hook a puncher in.

Ravel-tongue builds a careful loop, bunches his lips and splatters a haw bush with brown. He rattles his rowels then and wades into that old cow.

That old scallawag don't light a shuck quick like she's been doing. She takes four or five steps forward, like she's calling the waddie's bluff, then wheels at the last moment and bats through the brush in a belly-jarring run.

Ravel-tongue twines the old longhorn as she breaks out of a hawthicket. But he only snags one horn and the old cow's nose. It gives the old loop-dodger more credit in my sight. She's the out-loop-dodgingest old ladina I ever laid a look at.

Ravel-tongue lets out a victory holler and squats his hoss to take the load. The old cow is going fast, her horns popping the brush like a .45 bullet batting through a dead grape vine snarl. When she reaches the end of that twisted hemp, there's a sickening snap and the 'poke's saddle cinch busts. Ravel-tongue's old kak goes sailing off over the ears of his squatted gray like it's hitched to a hi-lifed brahma bull. He goes with it.

THE 'POKE is still straddle of his saddle when it lights. The old cow's got her tail up and is heading for tall timber. She's dragging that 'poke-filled saddle like

it's a ball of dry bunch grass blown along by a strong tail wind.

Before I'm alive to the proposition as she stands, I see Ravel-tongue sink into the scrub oak, yelling and trying to get loose from that saddle. I bog my spurs and follow.

When my eyesight catches up with the stampeding shebang again they're busting the crust off a little sand flat, raising more dust than a plowed-field whirlwind. I ain't gaining fast. Seems like that nag of mine is vaccinated with slowness about now.

They hit the woods again then and that old cow jumps a log. The saddle strikes hard. Ravel-tongue keeps going but the old cow don't. When that rope goes tight, the crusty old longhorn turns a wildcat and gets up looking for something to blame it on. What she sees is the seat of Ravel-tongue's pants as the 'poke pulls up from a rump-sliding stop. It's enough to satisfy that old cow. She lets out a deep belly-beller and wades in. She's got a horn lowered to help the 'poke get a start in case he's going any place. Ravel-tongue's dazed a little but one look at all that paw and beller coming at him and his head clears fast. The old ladina's sure 'nuf on the prod now. Her manners are laid aside for the time being. She aims to argue her and Ravel-tongue's differences out here and now, only she'll use horns instead of words.

That old cow's fast, but Ravel-tongue's faster. They start the foot-race with a three-foot gap between them and the old cow can't close it.

Now's about the time I ought to paint myself into the picture, I figure, so I bog my spurs and make to head that old cow.

I head her all right. Leastwise, I get in front of her. The old hussy's in such a state of mind right now though that she ain't particular who she runs at. The old cow's got a burning ache to get a horn into something solid.

It's my bronc that lets me down on this play. There's too much bellering, pawing and horn rattling going on around here to suit him. The nag falls apart. He goes haywire. He's running, dodging, and pitching all at the same time. By the time a man can bunch his lips and spit, I've hit a limb with my chest and am sailing through the air looking for a place to land. It's on one of them old pack-sand bull-nettles. I tromp it to the ground with my neck and shoulder. It starts stinging like hot linament but I haven't got time to scratch.

How I ever get up that bar-boled old post oak, I don't know. But that old cow lets out a long beller behind me somewhere and I'm sitting a'straddle that first limb, ten feet up, before my mind's got around to figuring on a course of action.

BUT THAT old ladina must not a'seen me fall. Somewhere during the scramble, that rope's slipped down her nose and slid right off her long horn. She's still after that nag I just left and he's batting through the brush, snorting like a bear's on his tail. I can hear the stirrups jangling and the saddle leather popping as the boogered cayuse and that old ladina fade into the brush.

I slide down that tree then and try to run Ravel-tongue down. He's still going through the brush, knocking a hole in it a bull could walk through. He don't even know the old cow's quit his trail.

But I don't have to run him down. Ravel-tongue hangs one of his long-shanked spurs in a grapevine snarl and plows into a clump of scrub oak brush, using his nose for an opening wedge. He piles up under a rock ledge, comes to his all-fours and looks out like a cornered catamount.

That 'poke's a sorry looking sight if I ever throwed a look at one. He's dressed like an Indian from the waist down. Pieces of his cream-colored silk shirt decorate the bushes along his back trail. The bark's knocked off his hide from his heels up. Ravel-tongue's hat's gone and so is part of his hair. The puncher

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LEST YE BE JUDGED

An off-trail Western story.

By Edward Schafer

JOSE CALDERON y MORALES stood looking down at the body of his grandfather. His back hunched and he bent closely to see if there were any signs of life. The old man was dead.

Jose straightened his shoulders and looked out over the valley. Below him he saw the town of Oaxapetl. And winding out from the town, creeping tortuously up the steep hillside, was the dusty road that led to the hacienda of his grandfather, the man he had just murdered.

The road was dotted with little figures running upward to where he stood. To his ears came the sound of their voices, hoarse and emotional.

"*Madre de Dios!* Jose has killed! He has murdered his grandfather. With our eyes we saw it as we worked in the fields."

Jose smiled. He looked down at his hands that had choked the life out of blind, feeble Esteban Morales as he sat sunning beneath his favorite olive tree.

The old man had not known he was about to die. There had been hardly a struggle. And now the village folk were running to where he stood, running to catch a murderer who did not flee.

"Stupid peons!" he thought. "They think to punish me for my crime. I have studied their simple minds. When I tell my story they will shout in surprise. They will respect me for a good and noble man."

So he waited on the hilltop for the peons to gather fearfully around him and stare with open eyes at the body of Don Esteban Morales, whom they all loved.

They came, one by one, until there were fifty of them, silent and wondering. They mopped their perspiring faces with great handkerchiefs and crossed themselves reverently as they passed by the still figure of the old man.

Jose stood off to one side, waiting without concern as they talked excitedly among themselves. Finally one of them touched him fearfully on the sleeve. He pointed at the dead man.

"Jose, you did this? You killed your grandfather? He was a good man, Jose. We all loved him. He was good to you. He fed you and clothed you. Why did you do it, Jose?"

THEY GATHERED around and waited for him to answer. He looked around at the faces, men he had known since childhood. A great contempt settled in his heart for these simple peasants.

They were so trusting. They could think evil of no one. He had murdered his grandfather in plain sight. They had all seen him choke the life from the old man with his bare hands. And yet they stood waiting for what he had to say.

His chest swelled with pride as he thought of how well he had judged them. He knew his story would strike them speechless with wonder.

But this was not the time. He must wait so that the entire village could hear his words. They must all be gathered together in one place to listen to his tale and believe in his greatness.

So he folded his arms across his chest and looked out over the valley to the great church that lifted its

spire above the flat adobe roofs of the little town.

"I have nothing to say," he replied simply.

He turned his back on them and walked toward the big house that had belonged to his grandfather and was now his. He had planned long and well for this; this hacienda, and the rolling hills, and the herds of cattle.

Now he could gamble and love as befitted his station. No longer would he be forced to accept the kindness of the old man. For long months he had hoped that his grandfather would die. But the fierce old man had clung to life with an iron tenacity, while Jose waited impatiently and planned.

Until he could wait no longer. For horses cost money and gambling debts had to be paid. And there was flashing, tawny-skinned Raquel, who tossed her pretty head and laughed at empty promises of the future.

So Jose had stopped waiting. And now the old man lay dead and his plan was beginning to prove itself.

His thoughts were interrupted. He half turned as Pedro Torriente spoke to him.

"Jose, we must ask you to come with us. We do not know what to do. Your grandfather was a kindly man. Now he is dead. We must ask you to come to the village. Father Ignatius must be told."

Jose felt a tightening of his stomach. Father Ignatius was a wise man, not easily to be fooled. He had lived in the great cities of the world and knew what was in the hearts of men. Jose was afraid.

But only for a moment. Then he consoled himself that his story was well thought out and would protect him. When he told it there would be nothing but love and reverence in the village for Jose Calderon.

He turned and followed after Pedro. "I will go with you," he said quietly.

IT WAS a solemn procession that wound down the hillside in the gathering dusk. Four men carried the body of Esteban Morales. The rest shuffled along with heads bared, whispering among themselves. No one spoke to Jose Calderon.

At the village they were met by the women-folk. There was weeping and tearing of hair when the body of Don Esteban was shown and the story of his murder told. Women crossed themselves and hurried inside to light a candle.

And everyone looked at Jose and waited with animal patience for him to speak.

A boy was sent running to the Church of the Virgin to fetch Father Ignatius. Another went hurrying to Pancho Carron, who was custodian of the little calabozo.

Pancho came in haste, his fat face perspiring, flushed with the importance of what he was about to do. Never before had his little barred hut been needed for anything like this. It was unthinkable.

"I-I am sorry, Jose," he stammered. "It is dark and dirty inside, but it is my duty. Perhaps tomorrow. . . "

Jose silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"Gracias, Pancho, amigo. I do not blame you for this. It is your duty."

He stepped inside and heard the oaken door grate shut behind him. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the dim light and he made his way to the little barred window. The sky was already dark. Soon he heard the deep sound of churchbells tolling for Esteban Morales.

The palms of his hands were suddenly damp with perspiration and he wiped them frantically on the silken scarf he wore about his throat. Already he could feel the rope about his throat and he cursed himself for a fool.

His plan had seemed so perfect when he conceived it. He had been so sure of its success. Here in this dark little jail he wasn't so sure. What if it should go wrong? What if the townspeople refused to believe him?

He heard footsteps crunching in the gravel. They paused for a moment by the locked door and then moved on. As the figures passed his window he heard low whispers.

He laughed shortly. No, he hadn't been mistaken. He had judged these people well. When they heard his story they would be only too eager to fall at his feet.

He thought of Father Ignatius.

"The priest is no fool to be deceived by words. I must speak carefully before him. I must convince him above all others."

Tomorrow would tell. He settled back on the hard bench to await the morning.

THEY CAME from the humblest little farm miles away, so quickly had the news spread.. All were dressed in mourning for the man they loved and everyone buzzed with excitement. Jose Calderon, the murderer of his grandfather, was about to speak.

Jose stood before the alter of the church and faced the villagers. His heart was filled with a black hate as he looked about at these fools who had come to judge him, but his face was guileless and mirrored a sadness he did not feel.

He sensed the feeling of the crowd and was satisfied. They were sorrowful and bewildered, but anxious to understand his motives. Because their own lives were lived in utmost innocence, they could not understand deceit and guilt in another. It was this innocence, this unwillingness to judge, that he counted on.

A short prayer for guidance was delivered by Father Ignatius. Then the priest turned to Jose.

"My son, in all the years I have served the peasants of Oaxapetl there has been nothing but peace. An occasional boisterous vaquero, perhaps. Sometimes a peon has taken too much tequila on fiesta day. Even, once or twice, a goat has been stolen. But murder—never!'

He thought a moment before he went on.

"The townspeople are desolate. They cannot understand why anyone should kill a good man like Don Esteban. Perhaps there were reasons.

"We have not had an opportunity to hear what you have to say. Speak, Jose. We await your story with eagerness."

Jose's glance swept over the crowd. Every eye was turned upon him. He moistened his lips.

"*Amigos.* Yesterday I murdered my grandfather. I do not attempt to lessen the act. With my own bare hands I choked the life out of the helpless man who was loved by everyone.

"It was a terrible thing to do. This I realized. Esteban Morales was more than a grandfather to me. The food I ate, the clothing I wore, the horses I rode—all came from his bounty.

"I had much to be grateful for. I *was* grateful. He loved me as a son and I loved him as a father.

"And yet I slew him. Deliberately, as he sunned his feeble old body, I crept upon him and murdered him."

He bowed his head and choked as though with a great emotion. From the corners of his eyes he saw how he had moved them. The women had covered their faces with their mantillas and the men wept without shame.

HE FELT that the priest watched him with a steady, unwinking stare, but he was afraid to peer too closely to read what was in the Padre's mind.

"I do not ask for forgiveness for my deed. Though I live to be as old as the rocks of the Sierras I shall never forgive myself, and that, in itself, shall be an endless punishment for me."

He threw up his arms and forced a quaver of emotion into his voice.

"Yes, I killed my grandfather! But, before the very alter of the house of El Senor, I say to you that I am no murderer!"

There was a sudden sharp intake of breath and the rustle of many bodies. Jose felt all eyes upon him. He rushed on confidently.

"An act of murder must spring out of several causes; revenge, hate, fear, profit. In all the length and breadth of this land there is not one man who can say that my grandfather did aught that was wrong to me. Instead he treated me as a mother treats her best

beloved babe. What need had I of vengeance?"

He heard murmurs among the crowd. "It is true. What need had Jose of vengeance?"

He silenced them with a wave of his hand. Imperceptibly he could feel the crowd becoming his.

"His generosity was known to all. There was no act of kindness that he did not perform for me, as he did for everyone else. Could I hate such a man? Or fear him? No, *amigos,* I loved my grandfather. I could not have killed him out of hate or fear.

"I come now to profit. There may be some among you who will point to the wealth of my grandfather and say that I killed him for this.

"But look at me! My clothes are of the finest cloth. The leather of my chaparrajos is as soft as silk. My spurs are of silver. Nothing was denied me. I lived as a man of wealth. What need had I of profit?

"Surely no one can say that this was a reason for wanton murder!"

Jose paused triumphantly, his eyes glowing with excitement. He knew he had them in the palm of his hand. He felt it even before the outbreak of low murmurs as they told one another that here before them was no cruel and wanton murderer.

THEN THERE was silence as Father Ignatius cleared his throat. He rose from his seat and moved before the alter.

Jose watched him with apprehension. The Padre's face was inscrutable. Jose wondered what he was thinking.

Father Ignatius raised his arms.

"My children, Jose Calderon's speech was good and I am sure he has convinced you of what he says. I, too, am convinced.

"But, although he has made clear to you that he could not have killed Esteban Morales out of revenge, hate, fear or profit, he has not denied the killing."

The priest dropped his arms to his sides and waited a moment before continuing. His clear eyes clashed with the fiery look of the man before him.

"We have heard the reasons why you did not kill your grandfather, my son. Perhaps you will tell us why you did!"

Jose's face flushed red, and then became very pale. He had not yet played his trump card, but he must be very careful. This man was no fool.

Again he faced the peons. This time his voice did not ring out bravely. He spoke very soberly, as one who stands before divine judgment.

"There are few among you who remember the birth of my grandfather. I have heard that in his youth he was as strong as the stalwart oak tree, as fleet as the eagle, handsome and filled with vigor.

"My heart was torn with pain as I thought of his great past and beheld the meagerness that was left to him. He had to be carried to his place beneath the olive tree. He had to be fed. He could no longer see; he could hardly hear; he could not dress himself.

"What kind of life was this? I knew that in his heart he longed only for death to release him from his suffering. What had he to live for? His friends were gone. His interests were gone. He was but a shell of the man he once had been.

"Every day he complained that life for him was over. All that remained was torture and suffering until the time when he could ascend up to heaven and live again.

"But what could he do? He was a devout believer. Although he yearned for death he did not dare hasten its arrival. We are all taught that a man who takes his own life may not enter into heaven.

"The agony that was in his heart I also felt in mine. He was a man no longer and yet he was forced to exist in a world his mind had already left far behind.

"Then one day the thought came to me. If my grandfather could not die, I would help him to attain his goal. I knew that in doing so I would place my own soul in perdition, but what did that matter? Gladly would I spend eternity in Purgatory to

lessen by one day the suffering of the man I loved."

JOSE'S SHOULDERS drooped and his voice lowered to a barely audible whisper. The tense breathing of his enthralled audience was the only sound that came to him.

"There is nothing more I can say. You all saw that I killed him. It was a terrible thing to do. But what I did, at the sacrifice of my own soul, I did out of love for the man who had made his life my own.

"If I have done wrong, I shall be punished. I only ask that I be not judged too harshly by you, my fellow townspeople. For it is written: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged'.

"My guilt I admit. And for my judgment I commend my soul to El Senor, to do with as He sees fit!"

Dramatically he sank to his knees before the alter, his heart pumping exultantly as he heard the sudden cries of acclaim from the assembled peons. He knew he had won by playing cleverly upon their superstitious awe.

He heard excited voices calling to one another. There were cries of: "Jose the Good." He suppressed a shout of triumph and remained sorrowfully on his knees.

The shouting died down. There was an expectant hush. Jose raised his head and then clambered to his feet.

Father Ignatius stood behind the alter. He slowly turned the pages of the great Bible that lay before him. He looked at Jose, then past him to the stained glass window over the doorway.

"We have heard your story, Jose Calderon, and we are filled with wonder. You were right when you said it was not for us to judge you. For who are we to sit in judgment over one who so willingly sells his soul into Purgatory out of love of his benefactor?

"No, Jose, it is not for us to judge or to punish. That remains for a higher power. You, yourself, quoted from the Book. But you did not go on: '. . . with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again'.

"The workings of the Lord, are above the conception of men. A crime against The Lord may be judged only by The Lord.

"Jose Calderon, we shall send you to Him!"

(THE END)

When a lovely lady is mixed in with murder

CHERCHEZ-LA FRAMEUP!

Here is a suspenseful New Novel by

T. W. FORD

Look for it in the July issue of

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

McShane quickly scooped out the money. . .

BOUNTY HUNTER'S REWARD

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "Hanging Time," "Get Off the Owlhoot!" Etc.)

●

Lead McShane had figured out a new twist to the old bounty-hunting angle!

●

LEANING low over the sorrel's neck, Pillar strained a look backward between the craggy walls of the old dried river bed. The lathered horse half stumbled and he pulled up its hammerhead just in time as they lurched toward a thorny Joshua tree. He rode as if the hounds of Hell were on his coattails. If bull-

roaring Lead McShane, town marshal of Sebro, wasn't one, he was a direct descendant; and he would be spitting brimstone and fire tonight. It was the fourth time in a few weeks that the Manitas-to-Poker Hill stage had been held up in the last few weeks.

Pillar's lean, hollow-cheeked face got a puzzled look. The drum of the marshal's pursuing hoofbeats had dropped off. Pillar couldn't figure that as he guided the sorrel around a long looping bend of the old river.

It was plain as daylight that he was heading for that little settlement where the river bed gave onto the sluggish yellow waters of Howling Creek. He came out of the loop and hurtled into darkness where the cliff-like banks narrowed so all moonlight was cut off. He had to slow over the rock-strewn bottom there.

Then the sorrel whickered. But the warning came too late; the huge McShane with his sombrero shoved back off his flaming red head seemed to spring from the very earth itself. He bolted his cayuse out from behind a boulder that stood at the foot of a narrow ledge that led to the top of the precipitous bank. It was plain. Familiar with the country, some place back in the winding river bed. he had quitted it for the top, cut straight across the flats, and dropped down to head off the fugitive. McShane's gun said the first word for him, slamming a hot-whining slug just over Pillar's flat-topped Stetson.

"Surrender, you damn road agent, or I'll leave you for buzzard bait!" roared McShane.

Pillar hit the rough ground on the run beside his heaving pony, then dragged the animal to a stop. It was a surprise move and the marshal's next two bullets fanned empty space above the vacated hull. And then the hunted man was crouched amid some white-flowered Spanish bayonet stalks and driving his own bullets at the massive target of the lawman's body. One ricocheted off the boulder the marshal had used to screen himself, making a thin ugly *whee-e-e* sound. A second dished up a spray of shale almost under McShane's stirrup.

IT WAS Lead McShane's turn to retreat. Jerking the cayuse around, he dusted back behind a spur that protruded from the right wall of the banks. As Pillar sent another bullet kicking past him he saw the John Law leave the kak and hit for the scrub growth. For a man reputed to be a deadly marksman, Pillar had failed to nick his man on three wide-open shots.

The reverberations of the gun reports faded off down the winding aisle of the river bed. Slim, wiry Pillar had already darted out and seized the bridle of his pony. He led it quickly, not back to the right side of the bottom, but into the brush fringing the left side. The same side as the spur behind which McShane had scrambled. The fugitive knew the next move. McShane, above all else, was no coward. He would come working through the brush to smoke him out. Pillar tongued his straight-slashed mouth hesitantly.

This was a move in the game that had not been figured on. He sent another bullet crashing down the bed that tore a spatter of stone from the projecting spur. Then, deciding quickly, he advanced through the jack-pine and clumps of mesquite, leading his pony. Once he saw McShane's sombrero on the back of his shoulders as he peered out from some foliage. Afoot, the lawman was scouring the other side of the bottom to locate Pillar. But the latter didn't shoot.

The fugitive got up behind the other side of the huge chunk of stone McShane had used as a screen earlier and leaped into the hull. Before he did, he had picked up a piece of shale. He arched it over into the brush at the foot of the other sharp bank.

"Come on out, you lobo!" McShane bawled. "You got a chance of living then, and mebbeso we can talk business. Ya don't—and I'm a-coming in with my tools a-talking!"

THE WAITING Pillar's mouth twisted cynically. Then the lawman burst into view in a moonlit patch as he charged, zigzagging for the other side of the bottom. Though

they said he was a cruel man who'd as soon kill as not when he rodded the Law, McShane had raw nerve. Pillar waited till he dived into the brush across the way, then sent his tired sorrel pushing up the ledge McShane had used to descend into the river bed.

It was close. There was no concealing the sound. The pony's hoofs scraped on the rock and debris bounced down the riverside wall. But Pillar was in almost pitlike darkness as he scrambled toward the top. Cursing with fury at having been tricked, the lawman punched out shots. His gun muzzle made evil gashes of orange flame in the darkness below. Pillar leveled carefully and sent one shot that made McShane jump for the cover of a boulder. But his answering bullet nicked the sorrel's right foreleg.

Dropping off, Pillar grabbed the reins and pulled the sorrel to the top and over, crouching as the lead whistled close when he was sky-lighted. As he rode away, the sorrel limped and was able to do little better than a slow gallop. But Pillar knew McShane would have to go back up the bed, recover his cayuse and then be extremely cautious ascending the ledge lest he run smack into ambush. Pillar knew he would reach the settlement. And then the stage would be set for the showdown. . .

* * *

WINDING through the sand-hills behind the settlement, he pushed past the closed General Store and came out on its drab little single street with the handful of scattered buildings hedging it. Behind on the sand there was a trail of sprinkled blood from the pony's leg. McShane would have no trouble following him. Pillar grinned bleakly as he saw the lights still twinkling from the place's lone whisky mill.

Dropping off before its sagging hitchrail, he sent the spent horse jogging on with a blow over the rump, then pushed through the half-leaf doors. It was a low-ceiled mangy place with a crude bar and a stale odor despite the alkali-laden winds that raked the settlement. Half a dozen men stood bellied to the counter. One of them, half-oreyed, the local blacksmith, gave the bleak-eyed Pillar a nod. The others said nothing.

Hiking at the belt with his pair of half-breed holsters, Pillar stepped up and ordered a drink. The bar boss, a wizened little man with crafty weak eyes, smiled guardedly. "Come a long way, pilgrim? Looks like you been riding more than a spit and a hop."

Pillar shrugged. "Was chasing a jasper that run off with my girl. Then I figured it weren't worth it; losing too much in bunkhouse pay so I'm gitting back."

Just as he finished, the smash of McShane's pony's hoofs came up the road. Somebody remarked that rannyhan was sure fogging the breeze. Pillar's eyes cut to meet those of the fat double-chinned gent's down at the end of the counter. Quickly, the fugitive's mind checked back over every move. How he had drifted into tough Sebro, a stranger, and let it drop that there had been some trouble on his back-trail. And how, in his hearing, Marshal Lead McShane had mentioned to the owner of the Big Palace Bar there, who was also the town mayor, that a load of bank specie would be passing through on that night's stage. And then how he, Pillar, had left town that afternoon, remarking very pointedly that he was riding south, away from the stage line. Now. . .

One of the townsmen had gone to peer over the batwings.

"'S funny, they's a new hoss out here, but I cain't see no rider. Say, Josh," he called to the drink wrangler, "how come you're a-staying open so late tonight?"

BEFORE there could be an answer, McShane struck—and in typical McShane fashion. He came busting in the back door, bull fashion, almost ripping it from its hinges. One of his pistols spouted and a chunk was gouged from the ceiling.

"Hold it ever'body! I'm looking for a road agent," he blasted as he advanced, sombrero threatening to scrape the ceiling, Colts pushing before him. "Fella called Pillar and—"

Then he sighted lean faded-eyed Pillar and a bullet bit into the bar beside him.

Pillar feigned innocence. "Are you locoed, marshal? I—"

"You stuck up the Manitas-Poker Hill stage outside of Sebro, chunkhead! As if ya had a chance to git away from Lead McShane and—"

"Prove it," Pillar came back calmly.

The stout man with two chins, scratched his ear with a hand with a diamond ring. His hands, like those of the others, were half raised. "That gent just rode in," he said.

Ten feet from Pillar, McShane stood gloatingly. "Fine! That hangs the deadwood on him for sure. I followed him in here by the blood from his wounded pony. He—"

"My hoss ain't wounded," Pillar said weakly.

"Where is it? We'll see," the fat man spoke up again.

Pillar remained silent, eyes falling. Towering over him, McShane nodded his shaggy head with its small bullet-round blue eyes and guffawed. Pillar made one more attempt as the marshal told how that stage had been carrying bank dinero.

"I haven't got any bank dinero on me, McShane! You can't prove a danged thing! I—"

McShane was over beside him and shucking the hoglegs from his half-breed holsters and tossing them on the bar counter. Pillar pulled his hat down hard on his head nervously. McShane looked around and saw the back room in one corner of the place. He signed the bar boss. The latter led the way into it and lighted the lamp in the wall bracket. McShane shoved aside the rickety table with greasy playing cards strewn over it.

"Now we'll find out where that bank dinero is," he snorted loudly. "Don't nobody try to git in here till I give the word," he ordered, before he closed the door and turned the key. The next moment he was on Pillar, half his heft, and brought blood from his mouth with a blow like a bear's paw.

PILLAR struck back, but the massive McShane had him by the throat and banged his head against the wall as he squeezed the windpipe. A chair crashed, one leg breaking, as McShane dealt another blow. And finally, as McShane grabbed him as he groped to his knees, Pillar nodded.

"All r-right. . .I cached it out back here in the sandhills and—and-d—" He picked his hat from the bunk and pulled it on quickly.

McShane grabbed him by the shirt front and hoisted him, signing him to be quiet. Then he told him to continue in a whisper. "Where?"

"It's right beside an old burnt-out cabin."

"I see. . ." McShane spat into a corner through his yellowed teeth. He pointed to a shuttered window. "We can go out there. Quiet now, ya coyote, mind you."

When they were out in the night jaundiced-hued with the light of a tired moon, Pillar led the way past a pile of tin cans red with rust and they started across the sands in their high-heeled boots. It wasn't far. Over a sage-dotted ridge, Pillar pointed to the burnt-out shell of cabin. "It—it's right beside that patch of buffalo grass there!"

Shoving him aside, McShane dropped to his knees and scooped out the sand with his big hands. He only had to dig a scant foot. Then he was dragging out one specie bag of the type used by banks. When he hauled up the next, the moon tinctured the pile of greenbacks laying beside it. Taking them in one huge fist, McShane started to rise when a spur rattled on the other side of the sandhill. Quickly he stuffed the greenbacks inside his shirt.

Over the dune came the bunch from the barroom, led by the fat man with the diamond ring. "Found it all right," sang out the marshal triumphantly. "'Course it might not all be here. I dunno. He may have cached some of it somewheres else along the way." In an aside to Pillar, "Keep your lip buttoned or I'll drill you, claimin' you was a-going for a hideout."

The little party came down the slope, the fat man mopping at his fleshy face as he perspired profusely.

"Two specie bags, eh. . .How about the greenbacks?" He stood brushing at dust on the lapels of his black suit.

"Wh-what?" said McShane. "Uh—greenbacks? Why I don't know what they had exactly on that stage. I—" He cut puzzled eyes at Pillar. The latter stood turning his flat-topped sombrero slowly in his hands, battered face Sphinxlike.

"Sure you haven't got them somewheres on you, marshal?" asked the fat black-clad man. There was somehow an implacable note in his flat toneless voice. "Sure?"

"Did they have greenbacks loose on the stage in the hold-up?"

"What stage hold-up?" asked the stout man.

MCSHANE goggled. Then he guffawed. "Well, mebbe *you* wouldn't know. But the stage was held up outside of Sebro tonight and—"

"Who said so?" It was both Pillar and the fat man speaking then. The latter added, "There was no report of that. Did the driver say so when he changed teams at Sebro?"

McShane's heavy jaw clamped up. "Well, I—I don't know exactly. I heard and—and I hit the trail after this lobo and—"

"Like you went after Charlie Feely the rustler when it was held up the first time, McShane?" It was Pillar speaking then, quietly yet commandingly. "Shot him dead up in the Gulch and found only half the dinero taken. So you said, anyways."

"What do ya mean, ya—"

"Or the second time it was held up. . .That time you killed Phillips, the little card sharp. Found only half the money on him when you brought in the body."

McShane, glaring, was swallowing hard. "What is this? I'm the John Law here, by grab! Sure Phillips did it. He—I picked up his trail and—"

"Right smart how you pick up these trails, McShane," Pillar went on. "The third time, you brought in Loop Dixon. But when we went to where he said he'd cached the dinero, a coupla thousand were missing. He swore in court he hadn't used a red cent. That's what made us suspicious, McShane. He hadn't had time to get rid of any of it 'cept in that one place."

McShane backed a stride, right hogleg half pulled. "Suspicious? Why ya locoed coyote, I'll—"

Pillar shrugged wearily "You see, the stage *wasn't* held up at all tonight, McShane. . .No. You couldn't get close enough to see what happened when I rode up to it in the trees on that knoll. And when it pulled into Sebro the driver reported no hold-up. Sabe, yet? And it wasn't carrying any dinero at all!"

"But I was sent word that—"

"Sure. That was the trap. We suspected you and—"

"Stand back and reach! I can kill any danged one of you what—"

THE HANDS of Pillar alone failed to rise. And when the exposed McShane twisted toward him and cocked the hammer, there was a spurt of flame through the crown of Pillar's sombrero. It came from the short-nosed .32 he had had rigged in there. McShane sank to the sand, moaning helplessly as the greenbacks spilled from his shirt front.

"Permit us to introduce ourselves, marshal," Pillar said. "He," he thumbed at the stout man, "is J. H. Gladstone, general manager of the line. Me, I happen to be a special agent, what you might call a private detective. We got our suspicions when you was always bringing in the road agent—but with part of the dinero missing. It was a slick game, McShane, letting the word drop in the hearing of some lobo or gun-slick when you knew the stage was coming through with special stuff. Then you laid out there and trailed down the poor devil on his heels smack after he pulled the job. Very neat!"

"It was a new kind of bounty hunting," said Gladstone as he grunted bending to relieve the wounded marshal of his guns. "He made his own crimes practically to order."

Pillar chuckled. "And hung this one on himself. . ."

(THE END)

Here's a salty yarn of rangeland justice by the Author of "Mountain Men Don't Quit."

A FAIR SHAKE

By Chuck Martin

Gospel Cummings was doing his best to keep peace, but . . .

GOSPEL CUMMINGS sat on a little bench in front of his sod-and-log cabin, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun. Because death was as inevitable as taxes, Cummings lived simply and in comparative comfort. The tall ungainly plainsman was the un-official caretaker of the Devil's Graveyard, and he could preach an eloquent sermon over the final resting places of turbulent souls who had fulfilled their destinies by dying with their boots on.

Although Cummings maintained that his life was an open book, his past was shrouded in mystery. He was not an ordained minister, and he was a man of sorrow. A full, luxuriant black beard covered his face from eyes to throat, and the tails of his frock coat carried mute testimony of his dual personality.

The Apostle of brotherly love carried a well-worn Bible in the left tail; a quart of *Three Daisies* whiskey in the right. He was seldom cold sober, yet none in Vaca town had ever seen Gospel Cummings drunk. His deep-set brown eyes above the hawkish broken nose were perpetually sad, and a mantle of melancholy dignity clothed him like a friar's robe.

The entrance to the Devil's Graveyard was a narrow defile between two volcanic cliffs. A procession was approaching the burying ground with Boot Hill Crandall's black wagon in the van. Horsebackers followed two

abreast to pay their respects to the departed.

Sam Breadon had shot second in a gun argument with Cal Tucker, and the Coroner's jury had rendered a verdict of self defense. The shooting had climaxed a long and bitter argument over the boundary line between the Circle B and the Box T.

BOOT HILL CRANDALL was the only undertaker in Vaca, and he had prepared the body for burial. He also earned side money after each internment, by chiseling the name of the deceased, and the date of death on the natural headstones of volcanic rock which gave the burial ground its name.

Crandall tooled his team of black horses between the opening in the cliffs, and nodded to Gospel Cummings. Gospel stood up and removed the battered black Stetson from his balding head, and remained uncovered while the procession passed his humble abode.

When the cortege had passed, Cummings shook his head and reached into the tails of his long coat. He brought out the quart bottle, marked it with a long fore-finger, and drank down to the mark. The bottle disappeared, and when the hand emerged again, it held a leather-bound copy of the Scriptures. Knowing Gospel Cummings and his insistence of the proprieties, the mourners waited by the graveside with hats in hands as Cummings approached slowly and took his place at the head of the open grave.

"He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword," Cummings quoted in his deep sonorous voice.

Sam Breadon's brother Joe licked his lips and glanced at big Cal Tucker.

"Amen," Breadon said earnestly. "So mote it be!"

Joe Breadon was thirty years old, a born rawhide cowboy, and as Gospel Cummings had often told him, an unregenerated sinner. As Joe Breadon had often told Cummings, he, Joe, didn't hold with busting sin.

Gospel Cummings turned the wrath of his brown eyes upon Breadon who now stood with downcast eyes. Cal Tucker shrugged his right shoulder to bring his hand close to the grips of his six-shooter, the same one which had punctuated Sam Breadon's earthly career.

"Thou shall not kill," Cummings said sternly, and began to read from the Book.

The hard-faced cattlemen listened as Cummings stressed the sins and weaknesses of the flesh, and told of a brighter life in the Green Pastures over on the other side. Neither Breadon nor Tucker spoke again or looked at each other, but every man at the graveside knew that a challenge had been made. . . and accepted.

Cummings concluded the service when he picked up a clod and threw it in on the casket.

"Vaya con Dios," he spoke his final message. "Go thou with the Lord!"

The Circle B men each threw a clod in the grave, but the Box T outfit mounted their horses and rode from the canyon. Gospel Cummings walked slowly back to his cabin and saddled his horse.

Boot Hill Crandall followed with his black wagon, stopping just long enough to hand Cummings a twenty-dollar gold piece, his fee for preaching the sermon. The friends of the deceased would fill in the grave according to custom.

* * *

GOSPEL CUMMINGS rode into Vaca and tied his horse behind the General Store. While the storekeeper was filling his order for supplies, Cummings said he'd ask for his mail at the Post Office, although he had never received a letter during his long residence in Vaca County. However, Cummings always made a point of asking for his mail as a sop to his troubled conscience.

The Post Office was across the alley from the Casino saloon in which Cummings had never taken a drink. He was an "Off-the-premises" customer. The fat bartender wrapped

two quart bottles of Three Daisies whiskey in an old newspaper, tested the gold piece with his teeth and took out eight dollars. After handing Cummings the change, the bartender took a little sponge and cleaned the slate of Cummings' indebtedness, at two dollars a quart.

"Better go out the back way like you came in, Gospel," he suggested casually. "Joe Breadon is on the prod, and Cal Tucker prods mighty easy. How's business in the Devil's Graveyard?"

"Many a true word is spoken in jest, my wayward brother," Cummings answered mournfully, as he regarded Fat with a glance of disapproval. "Your boss traffics in the souls of men, and Boot Hill Crandall disposes of their earthly remains. How sweet and how pleasant it would be for brothers to dwell together in harmony."

"I dunno what part of the critter you make a living on, but it's a living," the bartender said sourly. "Have one on the house before you ride back to your place of business."

He knew that Cummings would refuse, but the procedure never varied. Gospel Cummings would allow the devils of thirst to punish him for his sins while he was in town, but once away from the knowing smiles of other sinners, he would stop his horse and light down to look at his saddle. . . and refresh himself with a one-ounce shot of Three Daisies.

Fat Latham stared when Cummings tucked the package under his left arm and walked straight and proud through the long bar-room to the front swinging doors. It lacked a few minutes to sundown, and there was a hushed expectancy out on the street.

Gospel Cummings lifted his head and stroked his luxuriant black beard. He saw the Tucker crowd across the street near the Hardware Store, their ponies tied to the rack near where Cal Tucker stood waiting.

Several horses were tied to the rail in front of the Casino, and their riders were gathered in a little knot at the side of the store. The horses were branded on the left shoulder with the Circle B, and Joe Breadon was the only man near the horses.

Cal Tucker was watching Joe Breadon without seeming to see his challenger, and the sun sank below the Vermillion Cliffs just as Cummings reached the rail beside Joe Breadon.

THE SHADOWS slanted out like long gray lances which pointed directly across the street toward the boss of the Box T. As though motivated by a common impulse, Breadon and Tucker left their respective rails and started walking slowly toward the middle of the street, and each other.

Joe Breadon flicked the handle of his six-shooter with the tips of sensitive fingers to free it from possible hang. Cal Tucker copied the move from force of habit, but neither move was hostile. They were like two skilled workmen making sure that their tools were close to hand, and ready for use.

Gospel Cummings came even with Breadon, and his left boot hung poised to get in step with the Circle B owner. Then he was walking with Breadon and matching his stride, with the tails of his long coat slapping against the calves of his legs where they were weighted down by the agents of Good and Evil. The Scriptures in one side, the bottle in the other.

Breadon's eyes narrowed with annoyance as he watched his brother's killer coming toward him. He could see the scowl on Cal Tucker's weathered face as Tucker tried to figure out where Gospel Cummings came into the play. This was to be a showdown shoot-out according to the unwritten rules of old Judge Colt, with Sheriff Cord Porter out of town.

Every cowboy knew the rules, just as he meticulously followed the etiquette of the open range. You didn't set your plate of vittles down on the chuck-wagon tail gate, or tamper with another man's gear. No one ex-

plained these things to you; they just came natural like stacking your dishes in the wreck-pan after you had finished eating around the wagon during roundup.

Joe Breadon had used the words of the text Gospel Cummings had spoken at the graveside, when he had issued his challenge.

"He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword!"

Breadon had merely said:" *So mote it be,"* but he had spoken to his brother's killer. Breadon also wondered where Gospel Cummings fitted into the picture where two was company, and three was a crowd.

Perhaps Cal Tucker had rigged the deal with the Holy Joe to save himself from a killing. Joe Breadon shrugged irritably and shook his head. Tucker didn't lack for sand, and he wasn't the kind of a man who sent some one else to do his personal chores.

Cal Tucker was thinking the same thing as he watched the two men striding toward him. The business of Gospel Cummings was busting sin, just as he, Cal Tucker, busted his own mustangs for work. Put the fear of The Lord in the critters, and what did it get you? They humped up every morning regardless, and they weren't fit to live with until they had snapped the kinks from their backs.

Tucker measured the distance with an expert eye and stopped with his boots spread wide for balance. Joe Breadon copied the move with his right hand poised above the .45 Colt in his open holster. He licked his lips, took a deep breath, and said:

"Well?"

"I am," Tucker answered stonily. "It's your deal!"

So it was Joe Breadon's deal, and he meant to draw a full house. When his hand flashed down to show what he had caught on the draw, Cal Tucker would see him, and would try to raise the bet. Bullets were Aces, and the high hand would win.

GOSPEL CUMMINGS took a hand in the game in which he had bought no chips.

"Thou shall not kill," he said clearly, with a humming over-tone in his deep mellow voice. "Let 'em ride, sinners!"

The two principals were absorbed in each other, and with the serious business of life and death. Cummings had stepped aside one pace. His right hand flashed down and came up, and the last red rays of the dying sun were reflected on the burnished barrel of his six-shooter.

Cal Tucker relaxed, smiling coldly. He had made a mistake in judgment, and he said so without evasion.

"So you hired this whiskered old son to copper your bet," he accused Breadon. "I'll be seeing you around, cow feller!"

"If he works cheap, your money paid him," Joe Breadon drawled his answer. "For two bottles of Snake Bite, and he's got the pay under his left arm right now. Next time it will be different!"

Gospel Cummings listened with his head turned slightly aside. His sad brown eyes widened as the muscles of his left arm tightened against the package of sin, but the gun in his right hand did not waver.

"None are so blind as those who will not see," he said quietly. "You fellers are set for a killing because of the old boundary dispute between your two spreads. The Lord moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. Storm clouds are banking up behind the Cliffs yonderly. Why don't you let the rain settle your trouble?"

Both Tucker and Breadon spoke at the same time, as they stared at the gaunt peace-maker.

"Rain?"

"It falleth as the gentle rain from Heaven, upon the place beneath," Cummings quoted earnestly. "The Devil has a hand in this augerment, my friends. Watch Devil Creek for your answer!"

"What's Devil Creek got to do with it?" Tucker asked viciously. "Holster up and match me evens, you whiskered old Sin-buster!"

"He tagged me first," Joe Breadon interrupted savagely. "I'll match his cutter my ownself!"

Gospel Cummings listened with a little smile tugging at his bearded lips. His right hand moved with the speed of light to holster his spiking gun. That hand came up and rapped down again as both Tucker and Breadon started for their holsters. Both were caught flat-footed with their weapons still in leather as Cummings filled his hand and notched back the spiking hammer under his calloused thumb.

A TALL broad-shouldered horseback rode up the street and put his horse to a dead run. A law-star glittered on his faded vest, and a law-gun was ready in his hand as sheriff Cord Porter slid his horse to a stop behind Gospel Cummings.

"Howdy, sheriff," Cal Tucker said carelessly. "You're just in time to join the Prayer meeting. Ain't he, Breadon?"

"Yeah," Joe Breadon was forced to agree. "Gospel was just about to ask the Big Boss to send us some rain. Wasn't you, Gospel?"

Gospel Cummings accepted his responsibility in the round-robin like a born actor. He sheathed his six-shooter and reached into the tails of his coat. Bringing out his worn Bible, he turned the pages, but the sheriff stopped him with a little gleam in his gray eyes.

"Yeah, I know, Gospel," Porter spoke sternly. "There was a drought in the land of Egypt, but this was broken up when it rained for forty days and forty nights. Thanks for helping me with my work to keep the peace here in Vaca, and this meeting is adjourned. Just pronounce the Benediction, and we'll all go home to supper!"

Gospel Cummings closed the Book and bowed his head. He removed his battered Stetson, and the other three men followed his example. They lowered their heads while Cummings spoke humbly and asked that peace should abide with them all.

"Amen," Cal Tucker murmured. "So mote it be!"

Joe Breadon set his lips tightly and stared hard at the speaker. He could read sign with the best, and Tucker had repeated the same words that he, Joe Breadon, had spoken at his brother's grave. They understood each other, and the meeting was adjourned.

* * *

GOSPEL CUMMINGS wrestled with the Devil all the way back to his cabin. A raging thirst gnawed at his innards, and his brown eyes glowed feverishly to tell of his torment. The two men within him were fighting the same old battle, and the Good man was losing. The Good man lived in the left side where he carried the Book. The Evil man had his abode in the right side, where he carried his bottle, and the holstered gun on his lanky leg.

Cummings had argued all the way from Vaca to the Devil's Graveyard, and he could see the ghostly volcanic tombstones in the moonlit canyon between those portals of death. If Tucker and Breadon had gone through with their shoot-out, many men would have died. The crews of the Box T and the Circle B would have fought for the irons that paid them their wages.

Gospel Cummings told himself that he was his brother's keeper, and a little voice reminded him that Joe Breadon was of the same mind. Tucker had killed Breadon's brother, and blood cried out for blood.

The tall gaunt man slid down from the saddle and tied his horse with trailing reins. His right hand reached into the tails of his coat and brought out a new bottle of Three Daisies. His fingers trembled as he opened the cork-screw of his marking knife, withdrew the cork carefully, and returned the knife to his pants pocket. . . . on the right side.

"Medicine," Cummings muttered hoarsely, and made a mark on the bottle with his right index finger. "Tis good for the bite of the serpent, and an ounce of prevention. . . "

The Good man lost the battle as Gospel Cummings tilted the bottle to his parched bearded lips, and drank well past the mark. His hands were steady as he replaced the cork.

The moon scudded behind a rift of clouds, and a drop of moisture fell upon the upturned face. Now the sad eyes of Gospel Cummings were serene and peaceful.

He stripped his riding gear and turned the horse into a corral behind his cabin. There was a shed for the horse, and the rain began to fall in sheets as Cummings entered the cabin to prepare his simple meal. The rains had come, and Nature would settle the boundary dispute between Joe Breadon and Cal Tucker.

A cloak of peace settled about the gaunt plainsman as he sat in a home-made chair and read the Book by the light from a coal-oil lamp. The rain gusted down like an answer to his humble prayer, and the bottle stood close to his right elbow. Cummings told himself sorrowfully that a house divided against itself could not stand, and that the Bad man got along with the Good man. . . when the Bad man got his . . . medicine.

* * *

DEVIL CREEK was running banks-full after a two-day down-pour. Gospel Cummings smiled as an early beam of yellow sunshine pried his eyes open. He stretched lazily and started the day by putting on his hat, after which he dressed himself and stomped into his worn high-heeled boots.

He was throwing a chunk from a deadfall into his iron stove when the clop of hooves took him to the door. Cummings stared his unbelief when he saw Joe Breadon riding through the portals to the Devil's Graveyard. And Breadon was not alone.

Cal Tucker was rubbing stirrups with his enemy, and both men were staring straight ahead. As though they had a purpose in mind from which neither would deviate.

Gospel Cummings dropped his firewood and reached for his long-tailed coat. After fastening his gun-belt around his lean hips, Cummings made two rapid passes with his hands. His right hand took the bottle of Three Daisies from the little table and dropped it into the right tail of his coat. His left hand performed a similar service for the Book, dropping the Scriptures into the side where the Good man lived.

When Cummings walked through the entrance to the graveyard, he knew that he was too late. Joe Breadon stood at the head of his brother's grave, facing Cal Tucker who stood at the foot, and a few paces back. Although Cummings could not hear the two men, he knew what each was saying. It was still Joe Breadon's deal.

"I'm taking up for Sam," Breadon said simply. "I'm my brother's keeper!"

"Shoot," Tucker answered shortly. "I've got you faded!"

Breadon wasted no more time in conversation. He had observed the formalities, and Judge Colt would decide the issue. The Devil would take the hindmost, and if any praying had to be done, Gospel Cummings was just the man for the job.

Breadon flashed his hand down and cocked his pistol as it cleared leather. Cal Tucker got the go-ahead and played the hand he caught on the draw. A double explosion shattered the stillness of early morning.

Gospel Cummings had heard only one explosion, but his keen eyes had seen orange flame stabbing from the two guns across the grave of the late Sam Breadon.

Tucker was the first to fall, and he unhinged his knees to pitch forward at the foot of the newly-made grave. Joe Breadon's fingers opened slowly to drop his smoking gun. Then he swayed and measured his length without moving his boots.

The hands of the two men almost touched on the grave of Joe Breadon's brother.

Gospel Cummings sighed, and his right hand reached into the tail of his coat without conscious volition. The tall gaunt man pried his bearded lips apart and drank deeply, and with no marking finger to guide him. Observing the habit of a life-time to not let his right hand know what his left hand did, Cummings replaced the bottle slowly, wiped his lips with

the back of his right hand, while the other reached into the left tail and brought out the Book. He did not hear the soft crunch of shod wheels as he found a place and read aloud.

"He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword," he murmured. Then he turned a few pages and added an explanation which seemed to satisfy him. *"I come not to bring you peace, but a sword!"*

BOOT HILL CRANDALL tooled his team through the entrance to the Devil's Graveyard, and stopped beside Cummings.

"Howdy, Gospel," the long-faced undertaker greeted soberly. "Are they both. . . ?"

"They are," Cummings answered sadly. "You have made arrangements for the services?"

"They both paid me last night," Crandall answered solemnly. "And you will receive a double fee for the Graveside services."

"It rained," Cummings said thoughtfully. "The rain should have settled their boundary dispute."

"It did," Crandall agreed, and shook his head slowly from side to side. "Devil Creek ran full and changed its course. It went back to its old bed betwen the two lines Breadon and Tucker were arguing about. They agreed to accept the creek as the boundary, and they shook hands on it in the presence of witnesses."

"I don't quite understand," Cummings murmured sadly. "The power of prayer, and I prayed."

"Both of them did too," Crandall said, with wonder in his voice. "I'd never have believed it, but I heard them both!"

"They prayed?" Gospel Cummings repeated slowly. "Do you remember what they said?"

"You heard them both say the same prayer," the undertaker reminded solemnly. "After they shook hands and settled the boundary dispute, Joe Breadon looked at Tucker and said:

"Amen!"

A gleam of understanding lighted the gaunt man's deep-set brown eyes. "I know," he almost whispered. And Cal Tucker looked at Joe Breadon and said:

"So mote it be!"

"That's right," Crandall agreed. "Then they both mounted their horses and rode out of town to keep the peace. They said you'd tell the boys if they both got a fair shake, and that you've never been known to tell a lie. Both crews are waiting back at the Casino, and what will I tell them?"

Gospel Cummings started to reach for the tail of his coat with his right hand, and stopped the move. He still held the Book in his left.

"Tell them," he said slowly: "It was a fair shake!"

The End

Good News for Western Novel Readers!

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

presents a new book-length novel

RIVER OF GOLD

You'll find it complete in the September issue of

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

WILD WEST QUIZ

By Idaho Bill

Turn to Page 92 for Answers

1. How many miles can the average cowhorse cover in a day without exhaustion?
   - 20
   - 100
   - 50
   - 200

2. How many acres in a section of land?
   - 160
   - 460
   - 1000
   - 640

3. *Sow belly* is an expressive name used by the cowboy when speaking of
   - his saddle
   - bacon
   - a pot-bellied horse
   - cornbread

4. When a cowboy speaks of his *string* he usually means his
   - belt
   - rope
   - saddle horses
   - necktie

5. Boothill, in the Old West, was a place to
   - hold a dance
   - secure new boots
   - bury the dead
   - put the junk

6. Westerners, especially cowboys, generally refer to food as
   - chow
   - chaw
   - chuck
   - stuffing

7. The *Wrangler* on the ranch is
   - the person who does the laundry
   - a cantankerous cowhand
   - the cowboy who rounds up the herd
   - the flunky

8. *Cavvy* most generally means the
   - cook's coffee
   - horse herd
   - unbranded calves
   - hired hands

9. *Aunt Sally,* in range terminology is
   - the boss' wife
   - the milk cow
   - a bedspread
   - the cook

10. A common way of measuring the height of a horse is by
    - hands
    - feet
    - inches
    - fathoms

What Do You Think?

1. ..... 6. .....
2. ..... 7. .....
3. ..... 8. .....
4. ..... 9. .....
5. ..... 10. .....

By Ross Rocklynne

. . . "It was so dark, Jeff, that Larry mistook you for one of the polecats who've been poisoning the water."

GUNFIRE IN THE CANYON

It only takes the sudden appearance of one new angle to upset the plans of years!

JEFF LAKE awoke so slowly that light sifted through the slit of his opening eyes as if he were awash head-deep in the early morning fogs that fill the draws and mighty canyons of the Montana badlands. But he was in a white-sheeted bed, his body one cruel sore of pain. A small, cool hand was pressed to his forehead, absorbing some of the fever racing through him.

"He's conscious?" asked a man's uneasy voice.

"Stirring, Larry." That voice was soft, girlish.

"How'll I tell him? You reckon he'll blow up?"

Jeff Lake saw them, standing anxiously over the bed, looking down at his gaunt massiveness. Young Larry Farmer, angular, sun-darkened. Helen, his pretty wife.

"Tell him right out, Larry," said Helen Farmer firmly. "Tell him that it was an accident. Everybody knows Jeff Lake wouldn't blame you just because you shot him by accident, especially when the light was so dim he looked like one of the men poisoning the water-hole."

Jeff Lake understood with sudden, shocking clarity. Of course. The water-hole! Thereupon he opened his eyes all the way. Well realizing the leniency given the ill, he held Helen Farmer's eyes so long she took her glance away, flushing. Jeff felt another shock. He had more than a passing acquaintance with the Farmers, but how was it he hadn't noticed the warm, competent loveliness of this girl, the sweet, natural curve of her lips, her skin as clear and transparent as a deep mesa spring? But it was said that the fight for life on the drought-ridden bluestem prairies of Montana could blind a man to the virtues of his mother.

Larry leaned tensely forward. "You awake, Jeff?"

Jeff smiled wryly, letting that be answer enough. Larry picked miserably at his fingernails. "I guess I owe you a apology, Jeff. I figgered you was one of them varmints saltin' down my big water-hole. I didn't know you were chasin' 'em just the way me and my waddies were. Moon was covered over."

Little semi-circular hollows rippled away from the corners of Jeff's mouth. His teeth flashed white against the dark of his Indian-like face. He looked down the length of the bed, noted that from this perspective his feet made humps that seemed ten body-lengths away.

"My mistake as much as yours, Larry." The words husked out. "I just happened to be ridin' alone that night, when I saw them range-spoilers high-tailin' it for the breaks. I should have let you know it was me in on the chase. Forget it. I guess you got a heap of troubles without me pilin' more on."

The girl smiled at last, and both of them seemed to glow with relief.

"Whew!" Larry grinned sheepishly. "That's a load off my mind, Jeff. We thought you'd sue us in a court o' law."

HE SAT GINGERLY on the foot of the bed, and suddenly, as if all the youngness had been taken out of him, his face was grim, remembering. "You're right about the heap of troubles we got, Jeff," he bit out.

Helen Farmer sat down on the other side of the bed, and their hands reached across, twining together tensely. Larry started to talk in low, bitter tones, and then Helen broke in. They took turns, talking to Jeff Lake as if he were some wiser, older man who could suggest what they could do to save themselves. Told him things that he, as well as everybody else in the Sun Valley country knew.

A tale of water-poisoners, fence-cutters, cattle rustlers—all operating exclusively within the confines of Larry Farmer's Big X—and laid over all, the grim pall of drought. Drought that had dried up the blue grama and buffalo bunch grass, sapped away the vital moisture from all but a few water-holes; drought that was bringing death by thirst to Larry's stock.

Yes, Jeff knew, drought was in the air, to be tasted with one long breath; or to be seen through the window in the parched leaves of the giant oak in the ranchyard, or on Jeff's own Bar M. Yet, of all the ranches in the valley, none seemed to have been struck as hard as Larry's Big X, added to which was the havoc wrought by range-spoilers.

And when they had stopped talking, Jeff Lake had but one answer to give. He said, "Sell the Big X, Larry."

Larry's face whitened. "When

I've put every cent I have into this spread?"

Jeff studied their faces, particularly the girl's. The sweet, fierce loyalty of her clear eyes reminded him of many things he had all but forgotten; things he had turned his back on, years ago. He frowned at the thought. He said heavily, "I been on the range twenty years, Larry. Sometimes things get too tough to buck. My advice is to sell, clear out before you sink deeper."

Helen Farmer moved her hand closer to Larry's, biting at her lower lip. "Who—who would want to buy our ranch, though, Jeff?"

"Who?" Jeff's eyes showed pity. He said, with a show of reluctance, "I suppose I could take a look around."

Larry rose from his sitting position.

"No," he said with such harshness that Jeff started. "We'll go down with the Big X, Jeff, if we have to. We're playin' the hand out. Anyway, Sheriff Vance is going to deputize a lot of the ranchers here about, an' I figure we'll be able to trap the rannies makin' away with our stock. But we sure do appreciate your offer, Jeff."

Jeff quickly forced a smile to his face. "You know your own mind," he said casually. He tried to shrug his shoulder but a cactus barb of pain ripped through his whole back, and he whitened. Helen Farmer leaped up quickly, with a commiserating cry. She and Larry arranged the pillows so he was lying out flat, and he managed to smile again.

"Reckon I'll have to stay here until I'm well enough to be carted over to the Bar M."

"You'll stay right here until you're completely well!" Helen said. "After all, it was our fault. I won't mind taking care of you at all, Jeff."

Larry pulled the blinds down to shut out a coppery, revolting sun. Before they left, Jeff asked them to send for Wolf Palo, Jeff's partner over at the Bar M.

"Got a little—business we have to talk over," Jeff muttered drowsily, and he was asleep before they closed the door.

WOLF PALO was built like a barrel cactus. His spikes were not visible, but they were there, sharp, poisonous. Sometimes they showed through his cunning, hybrid eyes, sometimes in the restless snaky movement of his fat fingers, sometimes—more obviously—in the greased-lightning draw of a .44. When he smiled, his broad face drew up into thousands of tiny wrinkles, and his yellowed teeth showed unpleasantly.

Wolf Palo was smiling now, throwing surreptitious glances at the closed door as he told Jeff Lake how embarrassed Larry Farmer was. He rubbed his sweaty palms together, laughing and chuckling about how Jeff had put it over on them, making them think that just because Jeff had warned his men with a shot from a carbine Larry had shot him "accidentally."

Jeff permitted the briefest flicker of an answering smile to cross his dark face.

"Forget that, Wolf. That 'accidental' shot is going to help us. What's the set-up?"

Wolf spread chubby hands. "We been hanging around the Bar M since you was downed three days ago. I was out on the Big X though, and saw a sizable bunch of critters up around Windy Gap. They look healthy."

"Healthy?" Jeff's eyes darkened. "Where they gettin' water?"

Wolf scowled. "They's a little stream comin' down out of the granite bedrock near the mesa. It's keepin' 'em goin', now the big water-hole is salted down."

Jeff Lake looked down the length of his gaunt, massive body showing through the blankets, and thought. Twice a day, Helen Farmer had dressed his painful wound. Twice a day he had felt the sure gentleness of her fingers. He had watched her, studied her, talked with her,

and what he saw and felt was highly pleasing to his senses. And this was affecting his plans.

Slowly she had become a part of his surroundings that he must possess, and his plans, which had begun with the simple need to add the vast rolling acreage of Larry's Big X to his own range, now included her. But Larry's existence was an irritant to the success of his new desires.

"Come back in a couple days at this time, Wolf," he said in dismissal.

Wolf's beady eyes darkened. "But, Jeff," he objected, "I could take some gunslicks and dam that stream—"

"Come back in a couple days," ordered Jeff. "We have to wait. The stream will be dammed, all right."

Wolf grumbled and muttered curses, but in the end he jammed his sombrero flat down on his greasy head and left.

ANOTHER day wore on for Jeff Lake. His shoulder pained him intolerably at times, but the fever was gone, in spite of the visible waves of heat that ruptured the quiet air that overlay the prairie. Early in the morning, Larry and Helen had gone to Esmer to confer with the sheriff, so it was apparent to Jeff that soon his plans would ripen. It was hard to lie here, day after day, of course, but no general of a pillaging army could have had a more strategic position to work from.

At three o'clock Helen returned. He knew she had come back ahead of time merely to dress his shoulder. He caught himself listening like a teen-age younker to her light footsteps on the floor below; his heart quickened as she pattered up the stairs. And as she came into the room her glorious sparkling eye touched off a spark of desire in his brain. He had to clench his teeth as she helped him roll over on his side. Animatedly, she was telling him that Sheriff Vance was going to round up every able-bodied man in the vicinity and deputize him, for the sole purpose of discovering and destroying the lawless band operating against the Big X.

"He told me he'd put an end to these range-spoilers if it was the last thing he ever did," said Helen, as she worked over his shoulder. "He meant it, too. Oh, Jeff, it'll be wonderful, not having to worry anymore. Only I wish it would rain. The prairie flowers are all dying."

Jeff looked sidewise at her out of half-closed eyes. She was happy now. Sheriff Vance, he thought to himself, would have to make a lot of promises with those eyes on him. He would have to say a lot of things he knew in his heart weren't true. Nobody knew the identity of the men who were plaguing the Big X. Not unless they had inside information.

He began to ask Helen Farmer questions. Sheriff Vance, she said, would be able to collect at least fifty men. It was being done in secrecy. Nobody, she said, could be sure he wasn't right in plain sight of the very man who was causing so much trouble. You might be talking to him and not know it, so everything was to be secret. They were going to patrol the Big X night and day, starting in the northeast pastures. That way they couldn't help being successful.

Jeff Lake agreed with her, and felt a peculiar, stabbing chill on his body. He wondered why his teeth were clenched so tightly, what caused the fine sweat to rise on his skin. It wasn't any physical pain, for the gunshot wound would heal. It was something else, some unaccustomed emotion that was striking deep in his mind, like an unseen enemy bushwhacking the normal course of his thoughts.

He turned his eyes away from Helen, marshaled his thoughts into their rigid channels, and coldly pursued his plan, so completely absorbing himself in it that she must have thought him asleep. She finished her bandaging job, gently drew the covers over him and left. He lay tensely motionless, listening

to the sound of her, sneering at himself for the weakness that was growing in him. But he would fight it, dominate it as he had dominated himself and others these last years.

JEFF HEARD Sheriff Vance and his deputies come in at sunrise. They were quiet, keeping their secret. A few moments later, Larry and the Sheriff came into the room to see if Jeff was awake. Larry was light-hearted. Sheriff Vance laughed when Larry told him how he had mistaken Jeff for one of the rannies salting down his big water-hole. Sheriff Vance was an old man and had taken long gray strands of hair from one side of his head and plastered it down over the hairless other side. The citizens of Esmer just kept electing him from sheer force of habit, and because trouble seldom hit the Sun Valley country. But now there was trouble, the kind that honest men are grimly determined to clear up, and most everybody saw that Sheriff Vance was going about it the right way.

The sheriff beamed down at Jeff. He knew Jeff well. Jeff had come into this country a couple years ago, and was a respected citizen. "Better take care of that shoulder," Vance said wisely. "Ain't much needed to turn it purple."

"It's well tended," Jeff said. He added, "Larry, you know that little stream that drops down out of the mesa over the Windy Gap?"

Larry's blue eyes widened. "I don't recollect any stream."

"You don't notice a little bit of water like that until a gully runs dry," Jeff smiled. "Then you begin to notice it."

Jeff told him he was riding past there one day and saw it. He added that a lot of critters were licking it up and keeping the life in their bodies. "Maybe you better get out there with three-four deputies, Larry, an' stay there till the rains come."

Larry's gratitude was worse than the throb of pain in Jeff's shoulder. He shut his eyes to rid himself of it, but Larry kept on thanking him, and telling Sheriff Vance that they didn't come any finer than Jeff Lake. Jeff was glad when they got out. The job that had to be done was getting harder.

WOLF PALO came back the following day. He stood over Jeff, his expression hostile.

"Better not send me away today 'thout tellin' me what to do about that mesa stream, Jeff," he said. "An' if'n you're tryin' to pull something off—"

"I'm not," Jeff snapped. "To night's the time. Take a dozen men and go well-heeled. Larry Farmer and a few men are out there now."

"They've found it?" Wolf exploded, ripping out curses. He said, silkily, "You told 'em it was out there, Jeff, darn you. An' I know why. You've fallen for the kid's wife!"

Jeff held his eyes icily. He said with cold inflection, "You'll answer for that when I get out of bed, Wolf. Meantime, stick to business. Sure, I told the Farmer younker about the spring. I want you to use guns. Savvy?"

Wolf's eyes flickered, his breath sucked in. Then he grinned slyly. "I savvy," he said. "You want us to shoot her hubby down. I sure do savvy, Jeff." He closed the door behind him, and Jeff sank back, letting his anger subside. Someday he and Wolf would have a showdown, but not now.

Well, the next time he saw Larry, Larry would be dead. So he lay still all day, trying to feel glad about the coming success of his plans. But somehow, when Helen came to dress his shoulder, he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Good thing you seen that stream," said Sheriff Vance, coming in off the range, tired and dusty. "There's more water out there than me or Larry thought. I'm sendin' more men out. Why, they's a thousand head pushin' around that stream. It's keepin' 'em alive. Cain't have

nobody foolin' around with that water now."

When he had gone, Jeff stared down the length of his body, at the twin peaks of his feet, and thought hard. He saw a dismaying portion of the future written out for him in that simple foresight of Sheriff Vance. It had always been Jeff's strategy to outnumber the enemy. But now Wolf Palo and his gang of gunslicks would be outnumbered. What if they captured some of Wolf's men, and Jeff was for the first time exposed for what he really was? Not a respectable citizen, but a skunk who had been bushwhacking the valley, and lately the Big X, for the past several months?

Jeff moved his shoulders experimentally; there was not too much pain. He practiced the whole day, finally got out of bed, and almost made it across to his guns on the wall. Then his mind blackened, and it was only by chance that he made it back to bed and swift, appalling unconsciousness.

After midnight, six men galloped into the ranchyard. Jeff Lake heard their curses. He heard Helen Farmer's voice — alarmed, frightened, tearful.

Jeff thought to himself, "They got Larry. Larry's dead." He tried to smile at that, at the success of his plans. A terrible fear grew in him. He couldn't force the smile anyway you looked at it—inside his mind or out. He lay rigid, exploring this new damning state of mind, unable to comprehend it.

The door was thrust open, and Larry flung into the room with Helen after him. His face was savage. In the half-darkness, Jeff saw his bare chest, a deep, torn gash across his left breast. And he saw a terrible accusation in Larry's eyes. But this was just imagination, which he knew as Larry spoke.

"They threw dynamite at us," Larry snarled. "Derby is gonna die. Hawkins and Walters and Lowenthal are hurt plenty. I was in the middle of it, Jeff, but somehow—" His voice grew too thick to talk.

HELEN Farmer forced him into a chair, lighted a lamp. The tears had been running down her face, but her hands as she worked with the bandages and iodine were absolutely steady. And Larry kept on talking, snarling the words out. "We winged two of 'em. They got away though. What we gonna do, Jeff? What we gonna do? We'll post men at all approaches to the spring, an' they won't be able to get at the spring, but that won't solve matters. They'll get at me in other ways."

Jeff knew then, with a terrific shock that split him open and allowed him to view all the snaky windings of his own mind as if he were another person, just how Larry felt about him. Larry had come up here so he could talk this thing over with Jeff. He was Larry's hero, and Larry didn't have the slightest suspicion who Jeff was. . . .

"Larry," Jeff said, "I got a hunch you're goin' to need more men than you got, so you can really patrol your range. The crowd that's playin' hob with your spread is probably a bunch of ex-wolfers, bushwhackers and fugitive murderers from down south. Likely they hide out in the badlands, an' likely they're in the pay of one of the ranchers here about who wants to force you out so he can move in."

"But who?"

Jeff said, "You get more men on the range! Likely you'll block them off from their dirty work completely, an' mebbe you'll find out who it is. . . ."

After this, four days passed, and Sheriff Vance's deputies patrolled the range without incident. The drought persisted, but in Windy Gap cattle found water enough to disappoint the buzzards circling the mesa line. Helen Farmer dressed Jeff's healing wound, talking more now that the fear was wearing away. And Jeff watched her through lidded eyes, steeped in a contentment that was false, for in the background of his thoughts lurked the grim menace of Wolf Palo. And

one day, as Jeff had known he would, Wolf Palo came, stood turning his sombrero in his hands, waiting for Larry to close the door. Then Wolf stood over Jeff, and hate began to blossom in his eyes like the opening of an evil desert flower.

"You double-crossed us, Jeff," Wolf said huskily.

Jeff said nothing. Wolf gritted, "You been double-crossin' us all along. First off, you fell for the Farmer girl. You give me a trumped-up excuse why we shouldn't dam the spring. Then you told Sheriff Vance about the stream an' he sent three times more men out there than you told us about. Now his men are everywhere. We ain't got a chance. If'n we don't watch out, he'll ambush the lot of us someday an' they'll string us up. What you got to say for yourself, Jeff Lake?"

"Nothing," said Jeff coldly. "Except that you better clear out with the rest of the men. I've decided we aren't going to take over the Big X. Take our regular waddies back to the Bar M, an' tell the rest of those murderin' ex-wolfers to take for the breaks. Hereafter, Wolf, you an' I are conductin' an honest business."

"I thought so," Wolf snarled. His open palm smashed against Jeff's rock-hewn face, and jerky, blasphemous epithets began to pour from his mouth like a befouled river. "You'll pay for this, Jeff. You can't fight back now, but the next time I face you, man to man, I'm goin' to open you up!"

He backed up, turned, snatched open the door, then turned again. A line of speculation started visibly in his wolf eyes, a sudden cunning. Then he was gone.

IN THE MORNING, Helen Farmer had taken the buckboard to town for a load of supplies, one of Larry's cowpokes with her. After Wolf had left, Jeff waited for her tensely, and a certain fear grew in his mind. The clock swung past noon, went to two o'clock. Twice Larry came up the stairs, looked from the window. He finally said, uncertainly,

"Mebbe something happened, Jeff. She wouldn't be this late."

Jeff lay with his head turned, staring out the window at the shriveled oak. He could see the corral fence. There were two tough cow-ponies tethered to a fence post. One was saddled, the other was being unsaddled. In a few moments, the waddy would be stripping the saddle from the other. Jeff's lips clamped, and he waited until Larry's head was stuck out the window again before he threw the covers off, and forced himself from the bed.

Larry didn't see him until he was halfway across the room, and had the door to the press open, taking out his Spanish wool shirt, his Levis and scarred chaps.

"Jeff!" Larry started toward him. "You're not supposed to be out of bed!"

"I'm out," said Jeff, and he grabbed one of his six-shooters off the wall and pointed it at Larry. Larry whitened.

'You're plumb out of your hear, Jeff!" He lunged for Jeff, because he knew Jeff wouldn't shoot. Jeff didn't. In dizzy pain, he dropped the iron, and swung his fist hard against Larry's jaw. Larry buckled back, sagged in a heap.

Walking downstairs, his .45s strapped around his waist, Jeff's feet seemed to touch nothing more tangible than air. He walked across the courtyard, making a great game of being nonchalant in front of staring waddies. They expostulated with him, worried because he wasn't allowed on his feet—not yet. Jeff laughed bluffly, scoffingly. He unhitched the tethered cowpony, swung aboard, and single-footed from the ranchyard. To the waddies watching him, he seemed perfectly well. This was, however, merely a pose. A big bubble of pain was blowing up to tremendous size in his shoulder.

He rode off across the prairie of shriveled bunch-grass toward the hills and jumbled gullies that led into the morass of the Montana

breaks. The more he rode, at a racking, jouncing gallop, the more feverish he became. His shoulder grew numb, until he was convinced there was no more pain. Then he urged his mount along without trying to spare himself, remembering only vaguely what Sheriff Vance had told him. It wouldn't take much to turn that bullet hole purple—gangrene.

For two hours he took it on the prod, snaked the wiry, tireless cow-pony through sage-dotted draws, up a shallow wash, and finally through a rugged break in a precipitous mountain wall, into a blind canyon. The Sun was eclipsed. Gloom saturated him.

A few hundred feet into the lowering canyon, he dismounted, leaving the cow-pony with reins hanging. No use to advertise his presence too much. And it was strange that he could think that clearly, when he was just a walking scarecrow of a man, a weak husk with a left arm hanging like a dead appendage at his side.

Soon he saw the cabin, fashioned from pinoak and red clay. It was a little place, colored in such a fashion that it was well-camouflaged against the streaked canyon wall. Behind it there would be a fault in the rock where horses could be concealed. Only Wolf Palo and Jeff knew of this canyon, and of the cabin they had built there if ever the need should come for a hide-out.

JEFF hugged the canyon wall. His high-heeled, hob-nailed boots were stirring up considerable noise no matter how slowly he dragged himself along. He kept his burning eyes on the cabin door. Suddenly he slipped. He fell to one knee, in precarious balance. His feet made a rasping sound on the loose granite rubble. He remained that way, though his face convulsed with the effort of rising. He could not raise himself, though it was imperative that he face Wolf with both feet braced solid. The kick of his .45 was going to bowl him straight back if he didn't get up.

Then the cabin door grated open, and Wolf Palo was standing there, looking down the slope at Jeff, his wolf eyes incredulous.

It was Jeff who spoke first. "Wolf, get Helen Farmer out of that cabin. I'm takin' her back to the Big X."

Wolf stared. Then he began to laugh. His face screwed up into thousands of fine wrinkles. His stomach heaved with uncontrollable mirth, and the gasping chuckles bounced around Jeff like ricocheting steel bullets. He stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"Jeff," he said, "you better lay down an' finish dyin'. You're washed up. Your cow-eyed Helen Farmer knows you for what you are. I told her it was you hazin' her hubby's stock."

"What you got in mind, Wolf?" Jeff said with enormous patience.

Wolf stuck his thumbs contemptuously into the arm-holes of his silvered vest. "Getting the Big X an' Bar M both, you poor boob. If you don't die right pronto, I aim to help you along."

Jeff nodded. Of course. When he died, the Bar M would belong to the remaining half of the partnership. "And," he suggested to Wolf, "You aim to hold Helen over Larry as a threat to make him sell the Big X to you at a giveaway price?"

Wolf did not answer, except by the hardening balls of hate and purpose that were his eyes. He was waiting, waiting for the time that both knew was coming. Jeff looked back, knowing now that it was of prime importance that Wolf Palo should die.

"Go for your gun, Wolf," said Jeff. He didn't wait to see if Wolf was obeying. His live right hand slapped leather, closed over the butt of his .45. The gun came up and swung level, and Jeff held it there, knowing this was the shot that would count, had to. Because here he was, on one knee, holding himself up by a mountainous effort only, and the backfire would topple him.

Wolf fired, and Jeff fired. Two discordant, thundering voices, spitting out their hell-flame, vomiting their tiny clouds of powder-smoke, trembling the canyon walls in their age-old emplacements. Something smashed into Jeff's body. He couldn't tell at first whether it was the recoil of the .45 or a bullet. He started to fall backward. He fought to keep his vision, and he thought he saw Wolf Palo's rotund figure, surrounded by the sulphurous cloud of his iron, begin to roll in a peculiar back-and-forth motion. Then he saw Wolf Palo fall, double up limply like a piece of string. Wolf Palo fell on his face.

And Jeff tumbled backward, landed on his numbed shoulder, and lay there, head down, looking at the red-hot sun shoving itself over the lip of the canyon wall. But something was painting the sun dark and darker, then black. . . .

HE AWOKE with an effort. A soft cool hand was on his forehead. Helen Farmer was sitting beside him, looking down at him, but he didn't trouble to take his eyes from hers, though he knew that Wolf had told her the truth. There was a bullet in him, dug deep, and it had opened up a channel along which his life could flow away.

"It's all right, Jeff," she said lowly.

"Is it?"

"Yes. Wolf told me about you, and it doesn't matter anymore. You came out good, Jeff, and that's what counts at a time like this. You understand, Jeff?"

He understood what she meant, but it held no terror for him. His fading voice spoke again, and she answered. Wolf Palo was dead. He'd had her locked in the inner room of the cabin. She had broken the lock. "It was very brave of you. I don't know what else to say."

But she had said enough, everything Jeff wanted to hear. He was grateful to her because she was strong enough to keep from giving him false hope.

He stared straight up into the hot sky. He was not surprised when he began to see clouds sweep across the blazing, tortuously hot sun. It did not surprise him that the clouds were becoming blacker and heavier with each swift passing second. It seemed natural for the rains to come when Wolf Palo went.

Helen Farmer waited until Jeff's breath died to nothing. Then she smiled—smiled at Jeff Lake, for she could see that he was smiling too, as if in satisfaction at a battle well fought.

WHO SAID WHAT
WAR IS OVER?
BONDS
BLOOD DONORS
The Need Is Greater Now Than Ever Before!

KILLERS DIE HARD

By Kenneth P. Wood

(Author of "Let's Hang the Tonopah Kid," Etc.)

When a Holdup Comes Off Too Easily — Beware!

"DARNED IF I don't wish this here business was finished," muttered Slim Holt, wiping the back of a trembling hand across his moist brow. "Gimme another drink to steady my nerves, will yuh, Barney?"

The man addressed uncorked a quart flask and reluctantly passed it to the speaker.

"Take a big jolt, for it's the last you're goin' to get. You an' yore nerves give me a pain in the neck. You got to keep yore head clear if you expect to cash in on this deal with me. Cut out the beefin' too, an' don't ask for no more to drink."

There was finality in Barney O'Dell's tone and the colloquy ceased. The two voices sounded from the shadows of a huge water tank close to the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad. In every direction, stretching away to the stars, was the California desert. After a short interval, Slim Holt again broke the silence.

"We should'a headed up North like I said. I told you the ranchers are fightin' among themselves, an' all the big herds are bein' neglected. Why, them yearlin's are growin' up without ear-mark or brand to identify their owner. A good mount of hosses, a rope an' a runnin' iron in the hands of a expert like me is better'n cash up that-away right now. ."

"Ah, cut it out, won't you!" Barney exploded. "We got to have money anyhow, don't we? Gimme a match?"

The next moment a tiny yellow flame cut a circle of light in the blackness and threw every object within its radius into bold bas-relief. Near one of the stanchions of the tank squatted two men. The one who held out the match was Slim Holt, with smooth, weak, chalky-skinned features and lynx eyes that were constantly and furtively shifting—the kind that never look one squarely in the face. His hands were pale and thin compared to the big tanned, calloused fists beside them. Barney O'Dell was stockily built, with powerful arms and thick, matted hair. The match lighted up his broad features and shaggy brows for his big Stetson was pushed far back on his head. Both men were roughly dressed but well booted and spurred, and each packed a brace of low-hung sixguns. Between them on the ground were a couple of grain sacks with little holes cut in the sides. A few feet away lay two well-stuffed saddle-bags.

The heavy-set individual took plenty of time to light his cigarette, and while the match burned down until the flame seared his companion's fingertips, he l e i s u r e l y pulled out a battered silver watch.

"Well, she's due in fifteen minutes, Slim." He blew out the light in the other's hand and stared at him in the darkness. "Now, we'd better go over the thing again because I don't want no slip-ups. When they pull up, you cover the engine. Make the fireman an' engineer climb

up on top of the tender with their backs to you an' keep 'em reachin' for the sky. Then when you see I got the stuff, call the engineer down an' tell him to pull his freight—fast. That's all you got t'do. Get me?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Slim. "But suppose'n the expressman gets his back up an' wants to fight. He ain't goin' to give up all that hard cash without a argiment."

"Say, don't you think I'm figgerin' on what he'll do? Of course he ain't goin' to lay down if there's a chance to get out of it. He ain't that kind of a messenger. But you know what I got in them saddle bags. It's real dynamite an' very powerful medicine. This here expressman was in a similar spot some time ago, an' they blew up his car. So when I tell him I'm goin' to repeat that little trick, he'll come through. An' if he don't we'll turn on the fireworks. Now don't go haywire an' gum things up. Sabe?"

BOTH MEN relapsed into silence. Barney O'Dell puffed steadily on his cigarette. Slim Holt stirred and fidgeted uneasily. A speck of light appeared on the eastern horizon at the point where the tracks came together. Without a word the two dropped their hats on the ground and adjusted the grain sacks over their heads, then flattened themselves into a shallow gulley back of the tank.

The dot of light grew rapidly into a glaring, white eye, into a blinding beam and the Southern Pacific Express slowed up, emited a groan and stopped directly in front of the water tank. The two hooded figures rose quickly and advanced. Slim followed his instructions to the letter and the engineer and fireman obeyed without a whimper. They did not see how violently his six-shooter trembled, nor did that matter much just then, for sudden death was aimed in their direction. That was enough. Meanwhile Barney ran to the baggage coach and banged on it with the butt of one of his guns.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within. "What do you want?"

"Open the door an' I'll tell you," snapped the reply. "An' make it quick, too!"

"Who are you, anyway?" came the voice from within.

"Neb'mind who I am. I want that bag of double eagles you're takin' down to the bank at San Bernardino. If you don't throw it out pronto, I've got enough dynamite here to blow you an' yore whole car t'hell. Chuck it out, or you'll be vulture bait in the mornin'!"

There was a slight movement in the car but no word was spoken. For a few seconds Barney crouched at the side of the big door, his weaving pistols covering it. Then he stood upright, and retreated a few paces.

"Hey, you in there!" he yelled, "if that stuff ain't out here when I count ten, I'm goin' to blast it out!"

"One-two-three-four. . . ."

There was another movement and quick shuffling inside the car.

"Five-six-seven-eight. . . ."

"Wait a minute, I'll give it up," interrupted the voice inside. The car door slid open a foot and an arm was thrust out. A bulging canvas money bag with an official-looking seal on the cord around the neck, dangled for a moment in the shaft of light, then the fingers relaxed and it fell with a musical clink to the ground. The arm withdrew and the door closed with a bang. Barney with his sixpistols leveled at the door did not move, but he called crisply to his partner, "Okay, let 'er go!" Again Slim played his part as instructed. The engineer clambered down into the cab, pulled open the throttle and the ponderous train lunged forward with a roar into the desert night.

"Well, I guess I called the turn on 'em," observed Barney O'Dell dryly as Slim Holt stumbled up beside him, half running. "Come on now, we got to make tracks. When them wires get workin' there'll be a posse out here in no time, an' we want plenty of start on 'em. Here,

you better carry the stuff an' follow me. Huh—twenty grand! Guess you never toted so much dinero in yore life, did you, Slim?"

A jingle from the sack as Slim shouldered it made him tighten his grip. As he walked he could hear the clink, clink, clink, close to his ear. He could feel the hard, round coins, hundreds of them, shifting and sliding. The sound pleased like music, it tantalized him after a while. His lynx eyes narrowed to a scowling squint as they peered through the darkness at the heavy set man striding ahead, and a sinister impulse hovered an instant in his mind and was gone. They reached the greasewood covert where the horses had been tethered, and Slim rolled up the loot in a blanket, lashing it behind the cantel of his saddle. Riding back to the tank the men picked up their hats, and tossed the grain sacks into the shadows.

"Get a move on," Barney growled. "We got to make that water-hole by daybreak. The hosses'll have to get a couple hours rest afore we strike out for the mountains. They're purty tired as it is, an' we can't afford to have 'em peter out on is in this God-forsaken country. Use yore spurs!"

SLIM HOLT had a growing hatred for Barney O'Dell and his commanding manner. He didn't relish the idea of the other man running the whole show. However, without further discussion he rode away after him in the darkness. A half hour later the moon rose, sheening the white, barren desert with silver, and the riders were able to make better time. Slim repeatedly fingered the bundle behind him. Occasionally he heard the faint clink of metal and his hand lingered. Even through the thickness of blanket and canvas he could feel the coins. He counted them in his mind again and again, and the figures thrilled him. One thousand twenty-dollars gold pieces! Bright yellow gold! Twenty thousand dollars of it!

He began to think what that amount of money might buy. The possibilities seemed limitless, and he reveled in fanciful anticipation and speculation. He straightened up his narrow, drooping shoulders and drew deep, luxurious breaths. Twenty thousand dollars! Life offered a new outlook. It was no longer the despairing struggle and grind of the under-dog. It was a thing of joy and the living of it a genuine pleasure.

Slim's eyes roved half defiantly over the surrounding desert country, now made brittle by the moon. Twenty thousand dollars! The moon light conjured for him ravishing fantasies wrought from the fabric of dreams. Extravagant visions of the pleasures of wealth crowded his intoxicated brain and through them all flitted the thought of his own little ranch. That's what twenty thousand dollars would buy. A nice little spread up North somewhere, on a quiet rolling range, well stocked with white-face cattle. For miles as he rode, his glutted imagination reeled with the delirious madness of money.

Suddenly he thought of the man ahead. He recalled their pact, an equal division of the spoils. The recollection aggravated him. Only half of the loot was his—ten thousand dollars! It seemed very insignificant compared with twenty. The figures counted differently some how. They refused to fill his mind's eye. He felt a sense of loss, a mental pain. As Slim brooded it fretted, stung, maddened him and the fleeting impulse that made his lynx eyes squint earlier in the night when he heard first that clinking in his ear, now became a definite, dominating and resistless purpose.

Just as the sun raised its fiery eye above the level of the desert the riders reached the water-hole. The mounts were unsaddled and the bridle-reins flung forward over their ears. Heads down and rooted to the untied command all plains' ponies obey, they stood panting, bellows-sided and with pulsating nostrils.

Barney O'Dell made a little fire,

heated a can of beans and boiled a pot of black coffee. He helped himself generously to both, and pushed the remainder of this sorry meal toward his companion. The latter ignored it. His lynx eyes were watching every move the heavy set man made. Slim Holt slowly drew out his revolver and toyed nervously with it. The acoustics of the desert are remarkable and so he put the weapon back into its holster. Not until his partner had finished his food did he speak, and then his voice was velvet and persuasive.

"Say, Barney, why don't you take a little snooze. I don't feel a-tall sleepy, so I'll keep a look-out for a couple hours. They's a little left in the bottle, ain't there? Well, gimme that, an' you turn in. I'll watch." Covertly he watched the effect of his proposal. The man addressed yawned and stretched himself.

"That's about the best thing that's come outa yore head so far. I shore can use a little shut-eye right now," Barney replied. "Here's the likker, an' go easy on it. Wake me in two hours."

"Okay, Barney."

THE BOTTLE Slim raised to his mouth hid from view the mocking smile that played across his pale lips as the leader of the duo relaxed his powerful frame under the meager shade of a mesquite. Half an hour later the man awoke dropped the bottle in the sand and on all fours began to crawl noiselessly toward the recumbent figure. The traits of the feline were in every movement. His poise and even the slant of his eyes were cat-like. A few feet from the sleeper he paused, unsheathed his bowie knife and, like an animal, sprang for the throat.

There was no struggle, no outcry. It was all over too soon for that. Slim drew back cowering, yet gazing with fascination at the Thing that now lay under the mesquite. A sickening weakness came over him. He fought it off and tried to laugh, but the awful, primordial silence of the desert seemed to smother the sound in his throat. Then the instinctive human fear of the dead suddenly possessed him and he sprang to his feet and ran to the only living things in that lifeless place—the horses.

The murderer's nerve deserted him and in a panic of terror he saddled his mount. Its mate whinnied expectantly, but he did not heed it. With fumbling hands he filled all the water canteens and tied them to his saddle. They made a heavy, unwieldy burden, but his prudence had deserted him too. He mounted and felt the blanket roll behind him. Yes, the sack was there—twenty thousand in gold! With a frightened glance over his shoulder he swore at the horse as he roweled it cruelly with an ugly pair of persuaders.

For more than ten miles he ruthlessly forced the beast at frantic speed until it began to show signs of fatigue. The sun was well up now. Already the air was shimmering over the baked plain of alkali. The panting, sweating, foam-flecked horse slowed its pace often but the rider urged it on with sharp slashes of quirt and spur. Soon the mount failed to respond to punishment and lapsed into a lurching trot, stumbling frequently. Sliding down the side of a little arroyo it fell to its knees, recovered and struggled on with painful, spasmodic strides. Halfway up the opposite slope it toppled over on its side, gasping heavily.

Half-dazed, Slim Holt picked himself up from the sand and stood for a moment staring stupidly at the exhausted animal. Then he understood, but it was a tragic awakening. Tearing the canteens from their fastenings he poured the precious contents down the horse's throat. . . it was too late. Fifteen minutes later a violent tremor passed over the beast's body and it ceased to breathe.

Slim Holt now realized to the full, the pitiless truth of the situation. He sat down beside the lifeless saddler and tried to think calmly. The problem was simple, terribly simple.

He could not go back to the waterhole, that was certain, for pursuers might reach it at any moment. Besides, the Thing was there under the mesquite. Between him and the mountains was some twenty miles of sun-scorched, waterless wasteland.

There was one chance in a hundred of his getting across the desert alive. He realized that, but the primitive instinct of self-preservation was strong in the man. The siren song of money, too, sang in his ears again, and he determined to take that one great chance. Only a half-filled canteen of water remained, so he drank sparingly of it, after which he slung it over his shoulder. Pulling the sack from its wrapping of blanket, he strapped it on his back and started up the slope. The hot sand emitted heat waves like a furnace. From the top of the rise the cool mountains were visible. Some of the peaks were capped with snow and their sides were forest-covered. They appeared very inviting and very near, only a few miles, but to the human eye desert distances are deceiving and treacherous.

FOR A WHILE he walked rapidly. The sun was at its hottest, pouring down a fearful, shriveling heat. There was no escape from it, nor was there a vestige of anything that cast a shadow in sight. Under his feet the sands were blistering hot and ate through the soles of his boots. He felt a dull, throbbing pain at the back of his head that intensified into a sense of burning pressure, while dark spots played before his eyes. The metallic clink in the bag of gold excited his imagination again, but the sun's awful glare produced a different effect from the moonlight. Twenty thousand dollars! It conjured no dreams of a ranch now, only the passion of avarice-dogged, tenacious, miser's love of money for its own sake—was left in him. Slim swallowed the last of the water, alkali-whitened and cutting. The pewter mouthpiece of the canteen tasted bitter, and the gurgle lent no refreshment. It was growing hotter by the minute. The merciless sun danced and grimaced and mocked his sufferings with diabolical glee.

Now and then Slim Holt commenced to stagger. He went through the motions of moistening his cracked lips with his swollen tongue, but there was no moisture there. His eyes were bloodshot from the scald of the alkali that billowed about him in the pulsating heat waves. Twenty thousand dollars! It boomed in his ears at every painful step as he plodded on and on. His brain was becoming numb and taking on the fire of the desert. At length he crawled on hands and knees to a lone saguaro cactus and sank exhausted within its scant shadow.

Into his heat-warped brain crept the idea that the sight of so much coin might give him the courage to keep on with his fight against the relentless desert. Feverishly he tore away the sealing wax, slipped off the stout cord that closed the neck, and plunged his thin hands wrist-deep inside. He quickly withdrew two handsful of shining discs, glared at them intently, then turned the sack upside down. A ringing, jingling, golden-red stream clinked to the sand in front of him, followed by a crumpled sheet of paper. Slim Holt peered at the glittering heap wide-eyed for a long moment rubbed his bony fists in his swollen eyes and then smoothed out the piece of paper. A single, hideous shriek burst from his cracked lips.

Ten days later several itinerant prospectors found his sun-dried body with the scrap of paper tightly clutched in one hand, while the other covered his eyes as if to shut out some horrible sight. Gently they drew the paper from between his rigid fingers and read it wonderingly. . . .

"William Turner, Mechanical Superintendent. Southern Pacific Railroad Repair Shop, San Bernardino, California. Requisition No. 11565—One thousand 1 1-4" copper washers."

MAJ. M. KAPLAN, U. S. A.
MEDICO MAGNIFICENT

A true fact story of a hero of the New West, as told to

NAT SCHACNER

Dr. Morris Kaplan had a nice practice in Denver, Col. before the war. He loved his work, loved his family, and his patients were crazy about him. But they liked to kid the popular doctor. "Hya, Doc!" they'd greet him in the street. "I hear you're gonna climb Pike's Peak tomorrow." This was a standing joke. Everyone knew that Dr. Kaplan was not very athletic. And Kaplan would invariably stare up at the towering, snow-capped mass of the mountain and pretend to shudder. "You must be thinking of two other fellows," he'd retort. "Don't you know I get dizzy when I look out of my second-story window?"

Then the war came. Dr. Morris Kaplan didn't have to go. He wasn't young any more, and he had a family. But he volunteered just the same. They made him a Major in the Medical Corps and sent him off to China —he who hadn't been far from Denver all his life.

He did a good job in China—a swell job. There were Stillwell's men, and Chennault's hell-raising fliers—and there were the plain, everyday Chinese soldiers. The wounds he treated weren't pretty—trust the Japs for that. But he cut and sewed; swabbed and patched; performed incredible operations and brought many a fellow who should have died back to health and wholeness. He worked day and night, forgetting about sleep, about food. He grew thin. All this was routine, however. An army medico takes it all for granted. The medicoes are doing a job in this man's war.

One day, however, during a torrential storm, a spent and gasping Chinese hillman came staggering into his tent. "You the Doc?" he panted. Kaplan looked him over. The poor fellow was all in. "I am," he said. "What's wrong with you?"

"Me? Nothing. I got *chit*—Melican officer say give Doc quick!"

Dr. Kaplan took the crumpled, dirty sheet the man extended. He read it quickly; whistled. It was written painfully, each word wavering with effort. "Take over!" he ordered his assistant. Then he strode, grim-faced, tight-lipped, into the quarters of the Colonel.

"How soon can I get a plane?" he asked.

The Colonel looked up, surprised. "A plane? A couple of weeks, maybe a couple of months. This is the rainy season, Morris. And you know what that means. What's up?"

"I just got a *chit* through a hill runner. It came from a Lt. Whesselhoeft. He was on a mission up in the mountains. He's stricken with infantile paralysis. He's so crippled he can't move; he could hardly write. Says he expects to die; the natives don't know what to do for him. He wanted us to notify his folks."

The Colonel looked grave. "Poor fellow! He'll die of course. Let me have the note. I'll send it down to HQ."

Kaplan made no move. "No," he said in a firm voice. "I'm going out after him. If there's no plane, I'll go by jeep."

The Colonel stared. "Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. "Why, he's a thousand miles out, in the worst mountain country in the world. There's no road. No jeep will make it."

"I'm going just the same."

"But look here! What's the good? The chances are he'll die anyway; even if you pull him through, he'll be paralyzed for life. There's no sense throwing away more lives.

You're much too valuable."

Kaplan stood his ground. "He's a human being, sir. Remember the oath we took when we became doctors?"

The colonel threw up his hands. "Okay, Dr. Kaplan. I'll have a jeep loaded with food and medical supplies ready in an hour. You've got guts!"

Kaplan had guts; but he had never dreamed there were mountains such as he was going through; nor frightening precipices and fathomless drops of thousands of feet. He who had turned dizzy just looking out of a second-story window and shuddered when he stared *up* at Pike's Peak now found himself clinging precariously to the side of wild and jagged heights to which the Peak back home seemed like a tiny blister. There were no roads. The jeep bucked and bounced through virgin forests, leaped from boulder to boulder, climbed grades that a mountain goat couldn't make, swung with two wheels over tremendous depths while the steering wheel jerked and jiggled in the driver's frozen grasp. The rain sheeted interminably; the icy wind howled and roared. But Dr. Kaplan, who had never been an athlete, held his eyes fiercely ahead and swore when the driver or his medical aide wanted to turn back. "There's a sick man out there," he cried, "a fellow human being. Keep going!"

So they went on and on, fording swift, treacherous streams, stopping to build crazy bridges over impassable ravines. Once a landslide roared down in front of them, and ten thousand tons of rock hurtled by into the yawning gulf. The jeep shook to a halt, bare inches from the giant rush. They had missed death by a hair. But Dr. Kaplan wasted no time. He flung out of the jeep, grabbed a shovel. "Come on, boys, dig!" They dug for four days before they could make a path to go on. Up and up, 12,000 feet high, where no car had ever gone before; and few men.

Finally they reached a place where even a mountain-leaping jeep could go no farther. The trail had shrunk to a shelf between heaven and earth of hardly a foot in width. Luckily they came across a mountain tribe. They bought some small, wild, sure-footed horses, packed their gear on their bony backs, and went on. And so, after almost a month, they reached Lt. Whesselhoeft.

He lay in a primitive hill village, paralyzed, unable to stir. Dr. Kaplan's expert eye took in the situation. In another week he would have died. Even now it was essential to get him back to a hospital at once. But it would be impossible to move him by horse and jeep. Only by plane was there a chance. Yet where could a plane land on these rocky slopes?

Kaplan didn't hesitate. There were two things to be done. One was to fashion a respirator for the sufferer so that he could breathe until he was evacuated. The other was to build a landing strip for a plane. He threw himself into both tasks with fierce, unremitting energy. By a miracle known only to himself, he took scraps of material and formed them into a respirator that was crude, but worked. He would never forget the look of gratitude in the paralyzed man's eyes as he took his first free breath of life-giving oxygen in weeks. Then, wielding a shovel himself, aided by his assistants, conscripting the scared natives into service, a tract of land was cleared of rocks, built up in spots, leveled down in others, smoothed and graded. It took two weeks. But when it was finished, for the first time in two months Dr Kaplan relaxed and smiled. For, winging through the now quiet air, in response to a message from his portable radio, came an army plane like a shining angel of mercy.

The pilot shook his head in awed admiration. "How in blazes you managed it, Doc," he exclaimed, "beats me! I've seen worse landing strips back home."

"Let's go!" said Dr. Kaplan.

They flew the sufferer over the

SIX-SHOOTER FUMIGATION

By J. A. Rickard

GENERALLY speaking, Speck Howard liked his job as a Texas Ranger, but he did not at all relish his present assignment: to clean out and fumigate two smallpox infested houses along the Rio Grande.

Not that he was afraid of catching the disease, for he had been vaccinated once upon a time, but he did not know anything about this fumigation business. Moreover, the inhabitants spoke only Spanish, and he spoke only English. He might have some trouble making them understand that they and their houses must be fumigated.

As he rode up to the spot where the two houses faced the north side of the muddy river, he looked again at the three cakes of the medicine and wondered how it worked. He spelled the name, f-o-r-m-a-l-d-e-h-y-d-e, but that did not tell him much. He understood though that you put a cake in a house with its occupants, shut the doors and windows, lighted the wick, and left it to do its work.

The victims were at home, all right: two or three of them in each house. He showed his Ranger badge and cakes of medicine, made some motions toward their scar pitted faces, and repeated over and over the only two words of Spanish he knew: "Muy mal." Then he made some more motions to include them and their houses.

They seemed to understand and were quite willing to obey. He herded them into their shacks, closed the doors and windows, and put the cakes of medicine in tin plates in the center of the largest rooms. Then he lighted them and got out, for he needed no fumigation himself.

He had not been outside long when he heard coughing and sputtering from both houses, to be followed presently by the inhabitants. They came out coughing and kept it up a while after they were out.

The medicine was pretty strong, he decided, but that was part of the treatment, and they had not taken enough of it. He motioned for them to go back, but they shook their heads, and no amount of persuasion could get them back.

Well, orders was orders, and they had to be obeyed. Finally he lost patience, grabbed a native with each hand, and dragged them back into the shack. He would stay with them and see that the job was done properly.

One or two whiffs of the formaldehyde was all he needed to change his mind, though. In due time he reported to his Captain.

"I got that fumigatin' job done, Captain, so far as the houses are concerned, but that medicine's a mite strong for people. I think it'd be better to use a six shooter first, to put 'em out of their misery."

(THE END)

Major M. Kaplan, U. S. A. — Medico Magnificent

tangled mountains, back to a Base Hospital where there was a real, precision-made iron lung. Here too the Staff examined the crude respirator Kaplan had fashioned. "It actually works!" they muttered to each other.

But Kaplan had eyes only for his patient. "Do you know?" he spoke excitedly. "I think you're going to be all right, Lieutenant. You'll even be able to walk!"

"You're swell, Doc!" whispered the Lieutenant.

"Nonsense! It's all in the job. But what really worries me—"

"What, sir?"

"I wonder if I'll ever be able to climb Pike's Peak when I get home. Why, if I even look out of a second-story window—"

The End

THUMBS UP AT

Complete

Four men had perished trying to scale the forbidding face of Thumb Mountain. Would Ross Potter be the fifth?

MCGAFFREY'S was a smoky bedlam. Dusty, sombreroed rannies ranged three and four deep at the long mahogany bar. The tang of liquor fumes hung in the air, assailing Jeff Stevens' nostrils. He sat at a corner table with Ross Potter, his reckless, good-natured saddle pard, and tried to adjust his sober soul to the boisterous post-roundup mood of the barroom.

Ross' eyes were beginning to bug out a little. The streaky red veins were showing, and Ross' apple cheeks were more scarlet than usual. He shoved the bottle across the rickety table, and chided.

"Down the hatch, Jeff. You're still sober, an' that's illegal. We waited eight weeks for this blowoff."

Jeff grinned at his stocky, high-spirited friend. He picked up the bottle. "Always was kind of slow getting started," he admitted ruefully. In a way he envied Ross' natural high spirits, but in another way, it was a good thing. Ross' heavy drinking usually got him in some sort of trouble, sooner or later. And Jeff, as the sober half of the combo, was always right on hand, in case Ross flew too far off the handle.

Tonight was going to be no exception. Jeff's quiet gray eyes clouded a bit. Ross' voice was getting cottony. His bleared eyes were flashing around the corner tables, as if daring some ranny to cross glances with him. He was an easy-going man enough, when he wasn't drinking. But with a couple of shots of redeye working inside, Ross grew aggressive; every word and gesture that came to his attention looked like a challenge.

At the next table a towering, painfully thin man with a ramshorn mustache was pounding the table before him, and growling in thick, hard inflections, "I tell you, there's no sense to it, Sheriff. Somebody'd oughta keep these dang young fools in line. Look how many's been kilt a'ready, tryin' their luck with the Thumb. You're the sheriff of this county. If I was you I'd outlaw it."

Sam Belknap leaned back in his chair and folded his plump hands across his soft pot belly. He said lazily, "Ain't none of my affair, Petrie. Ain't no law agin cliff-scalin', leastways, not as I know of." His pale eyes flicked curiously upward at the lank stableman who slouched across from him. "How come you're concernin' yourself so much about it?"

The tall man shrugged. "I ain't—much. But it's jest so dang senseless—all these reckless young fellers tryin' t' climb that rock. None of 'em's ever gonna make it. But I give you even money some more dang young fools'll kill themselves tryin'."

Jeff Stevens had been watching Ross Potter's face, throughout the conversation between Sheriff Sam Belknap and lean, hawk-faced Petrie. Jeff reached out suddenly, and grabbed Ross' thick arm in a biting grip. But already his chunky saddle pard was saying: "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Petrie—that no one'll ever make it."

ROSS spoke pretty loud. His words worked like magic, throwing a sudden blanket of silence across this side of the room. Ross was at once the focal point of attention, which was just what he wanted. He said a bit thickly, "Bet I could climb it," and shook his arm loose from Jeff's restraining fingers.

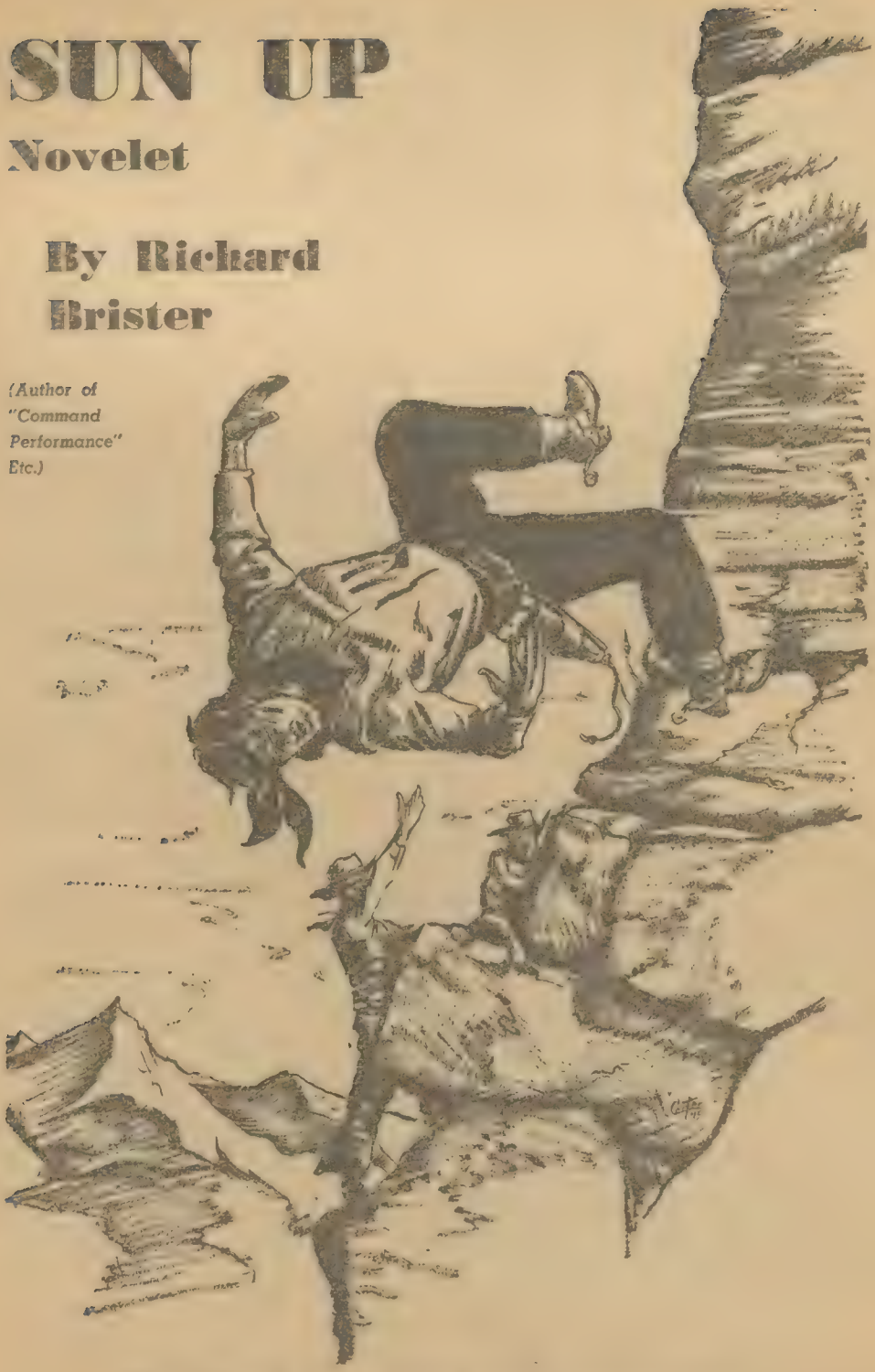
There was a moment of silence. Then from across the room, a new voice said quietly, "If you mean that,

SUN UP

Novelet

By Richard Brister

(Author of "Command Performance" Etc.)



The "Thumb" was claiming another luckless victim!

Ross, I reckon I'd cover your money." It was McGaffrey, the thick-necked freckled saloon owner. McGaffrey had a reputation as a reckless gambler, a man who'd risk money on anything. It was good for business, but McGaffrey was a square man, a gentle man; and it was plain in his flat honest face that he did not relish this bet. "Sure you don't want to think it over a bit," he suggested.

Jeff whispered quickly, "Let it drop, Ross. This isn't for you. I'd sooner see you scare up a good free-for-all here tonight, if it's excitement you're cravin'." This was the worst situation Ross' reckless tongue had ever gotten them into. The Thumb had claimed four lives, in the last six years, all reckless young devils like Ross who'd taken on a bit too much redeye and free-reined their tongues.

Petrie said in a voice strangely urgent, "I'd think twice, Ross. She's two hundred foot, the Thumb is. Straight up as a tree's trunk, and they're no more'n two-three real decent handholds on her. It's a bad bet. You'll see that, in the mornin'."

Ross twitched his fat cheeks, glaring at Petrie. "You tryin' to tell me I'm drunk, Petrie?"

The stable owner waved his thin hands and stared at the ceiling. "Shucks, no, kid. I jest wanta be sure you take time to think about it, afore you get yourself in hot water."

Sam Belknap's pot belly quivered as he voiced his thought on the matter. "Petrie don't mean no offense to you, boy. He's right, if you ask me. You'll see this thing different, if you wait until mornin'."

But Ross was stubborn. Jeff's heart flopped over, as he watched his young friend's jaw harden. Ross was simply unable to back down on any sort of a challenge, when drinking. Especially so now, with so many watching. He whispered across the table to Jeff: "How much dinero you still totin', Jeff?"

Jeff squirmed and said weakly, "Dunno. Ninety, a hundred, I reckon. But, Ross, listen—"

"A hundred and fifty!" Ross was saying. His eyes swept across the room, toward McGaffrey. "I'll give you a hundred and fifty even, McGaffrey!" He was digging down in his Levis pocket already, nodding at Jeff to do likewise. "We'll let Sam here hold stakes for us—all right?"

McGaffrey sighed. "I guess," he said limply. The two wan words spoke volumes. McGaffrey liked Ross. Everybody liked Jeff's good-natured saddle mate, in this range country. And everybody knew what must surely happen when Ross tackled the Thumb. It was a crying shame, but what could a man do to fight such a situation? Jeff's heart felt like a stone as he turned over his money to Sheriff Sam Belknap.

The sheriff whispered, "Stop him, Jeff. You're the only one who c'n—you've got to stop him!"

Jeff shrugged wearily. "You know Ross as well as I do, Sam. Nothin'll stop him, now he's put up his money."

Behind Jeff, Ross was saying, "Come on, Jeff."

"Where to?" Jeff turned.

"Got a lot t' do," Ross said. He was suddenly sober. "Gotta scare up some good strong line, an' a hand-pick, an' some hobnails. I'm tacklin' the Thumb first thing in the mornin'!"

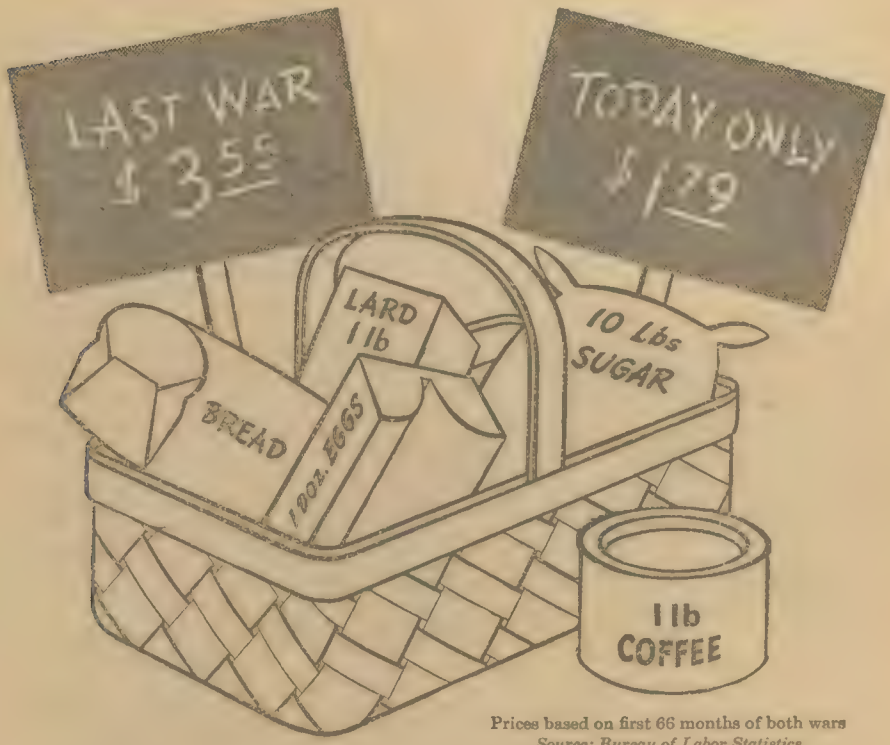
Asa Petrie lifted his slouched frame to an erect position, his thin arms prying down on the rickety table. "Reckon nothin'll turn you back now, Ross. I've got what you'll be needin' down at the stable. Wanta come along with me now, or drop around first thing in the mornin'."

"Well, thanks," Ross hesitated. "That's right decent of you, Asa."

Asa Petrie's livery was a hundred yards down the dusty street, across from the Cattleman's Bank. The gaunt hawk-nosed stableman ran a sloppy, slip-shod corral, but he had no competition, and hence could hardly help making money. He seemed to live over his income. He drank heavily, lost steadily at stud in McGaffrey's, but he owed no man money. This had once caused much speculation in town. Folks finally decided that Petrie had brought money west with him, and hence could afford his expensive habits. But the bank never held more than a thousand or so of Asa Petrie's money.

Now he waved his thin arms at a

(Continued On Page 74)



Prices based on first 66 months of both wars
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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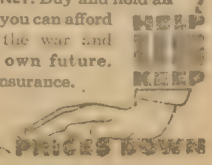

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

(Continued From Page 72)

pile of Manila hemp line flaked down in one corner of his littered office. "Reckon that'll do for your purpose, Ross. You're welcome to it, if it's strong enough for you. You're a heavy-set sort. Got a pair of hobnails somewhere hereabouts, too. One of the boys use to wear 'em, workin' around in the stable. Figure they'll fit you just right, if I can only find 'em."

He rummaged about in a disorderly closet, finally came forth with the shoes in question. They were a size too large.

Ross said, "They'll do, though. I can wear two pairs of woolen socks underneath 'em." He turned to Jeff. "Look, Jeff, think you could scare old Walters out of bed and get me a pick-axe. He's got 'em in stock. I saw one when we passed his window this after. I'd like to get back to the hotel and grab me some shut-eye. I figure t' be ridin' out by three in the mornin'."

"Go ahead," Jeff waved him out the door. "I'll get you one of those picks, if I have to break that window." He watched his stocky friend leave, then turned to the gaunt stable owner. "Sure am grateful to you, Asa. That rope an' them shoes was just what Ross needed. And I know you were with us, tryin' to stop him. He's awful stubborn, Ross is, when he's drinkin'." He felt a lump in his throat. "You think there's a chance, he might make it?"

"Don't know," Petrie said. "He's strong as an ox, and he's quick. He just might do it. I hope—"

The crack of gunfire smote the dead silence outside in the street. There was a high-pitched outcry, down toward the hotel. Jeff heard the sound of heavy footfalls. He raced through the door, blinking to adjust his eyes to the outer darkness. Thirty yards to his right a bulky object was stretched at full length in the dust of the street.

Slowly, the figure sat upright, took on a recognizeable pattern. It was Ross Potter.

"Jeff! That way!" Ross' chunky arm waved toward the alley that skirted the side of Asa Petrie's stable. "Some yellow-bellied son took a sneak shot at me."

Jeff exploded into a full run. He was through the alley in a flash. He rounded the corner of the board fence, came to a dead stop, his ears straining. He heard the wet snort of a horse to his right, heard the dry creak of leather straining. Then a man came riding furiously out of dark shadow toward him. His arm stabbed toward his holstered gun.

The rider was coming straight down upon him, meaning to ride him to earth, trample him under. Jeff leaped aside, tripping, scrambling. He brought up in a sitting position close to the corral fence, cursing a blue streak as the rider blazed past him. He was not hurt, but one of the high flung hooves of the fast-breaking mount kicked the gun out of his hand, just as he triggered. The bullet whined off harmlessly into the night.

Jeff swore deep down inside and plunged forward toward the place where his gun must have fallen. He groped in the half-darkness, finally felt the reassuring hardness of metal beneath his fingers.

He blasted four shots at the fast-fading rider, knew he had missed when neither the man nor his mount slowed their reckless pace.

Asa Petrie came running around the fence that bordered the alley. Ross Potter was lurching behind him. "You hurt, Jeff? The sneakin' coyote meant to kill me. Put one slug in my ribs, but just nicked the flesh. I dropped to the ground and played dead, seein' he had the drop on me. Who was it?"

Jeff shook his head numbly. "I don't know. I could see him, here in this shadow. A big fellow, for one thing. Had on a bandanna with some light colors on it. I durn near got m'self tromped on." He stared down at his right hand, for the first time aware that one finger was swollen all out of its normal shape, where the marauder's horse had kicked him. And then he thought of something. "You say he got you, Ross. Then—then you won't be able to climb the Thumb in the mornin'!"

He was suddenly grateful to the

(Continued On Page 78)

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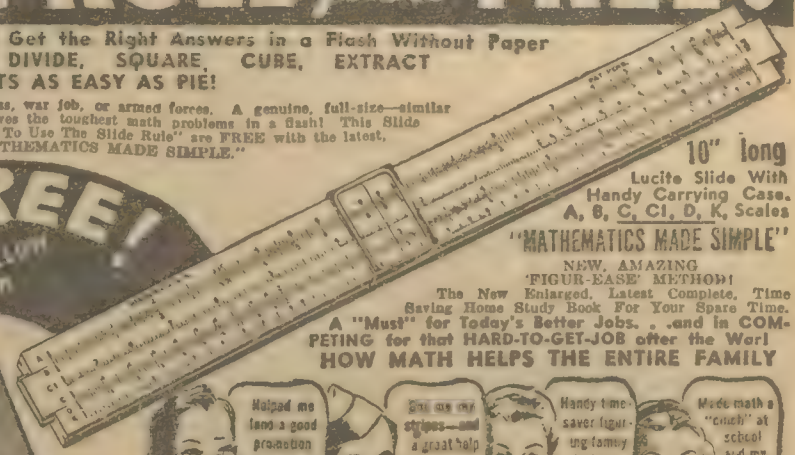

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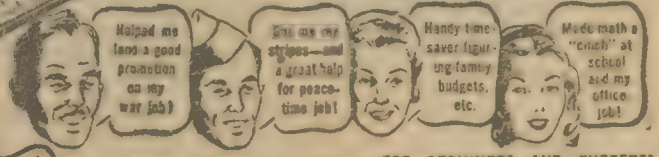
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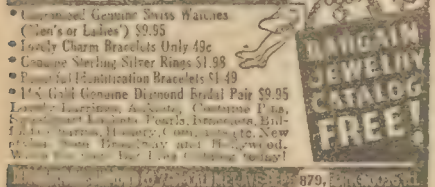

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(Continued From Page 74)

night rider. Maybe the man had saved Ross' life, by trying to kill him and not quite succeeding. It would be an ironic thing, if it worked out like that.

But Ross said, "Shucks, I ain't really hurt none. This little scratch ain't gonna change my plans any."

Asa Petrie said quickly, "Ross, you're crazy. You can't still mean to try the climb in the mornin', can you? The Thumb's a killer. You'll need to be at your very best, takin' that on. Besides, you'll be some hung over, the way you was drinkin' t'night, in McGaffrey's."

Ross waved airily, "What of it? I wanta get the thing off my chest. It's no good, stallin'. You see about that pick, Jeff. I'm goin' down to the hotel and get me some shut-eye."

Watching him go, Asa Petrie's thin frame stiffened, and he spat out angrily, "He's a fool, Jeff. A danged stubborn young fool!"

"Maybe," Jeff said wearily. He supposed Ross was six kinds of an idiot, going ahead with his plans after what had happened. For some strange reason, though, Jeff didn't like hearing Asa Petrie say it. Despite Petrie's efforts to keep the wild young bucko in line, Jeff could feel no whole-hearted affection for the stable owner.

What if Ross did have some odd twists to his makeup? No one but his very good friends had a right to criticize Ross, the way Jeff saw it.

'G'night, Petrie," he said. "Probably see you out at the Thumb in the mornin'. You're goin' out, ain't you?"

"I'll be there," said Petrie. "Hull town will, I reckon. Dang young fool!" He walked off, wagging his head, muttering angrily about it. He showed far too much concern about the thing, Jeff though, for the second time during this eventful evening.

JEFF STEVENS, Ross Potter, Asa Petrie, McGaffrey, and Sheriff Sam Balknap rode out to Stone Finger Valley together at four o'clock in the morning. The Valley was an eerie place, a gigantic stone bowl hewn between high mountain ranges by the slow, uncertain proc-

(Continued On Page 80)

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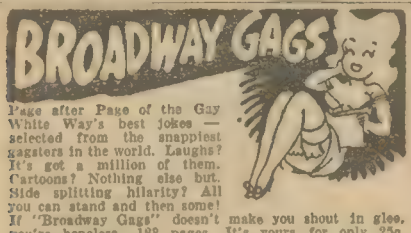

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(Continued From Page 78)

esses of nature.

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It was a place of shadows, of wierd echoes and double echoes. The mood of the place fell on their small party the moment they entered that vale of mute stone images, and Jeff gave way to an odd sense of foreboding.

Because there, across the valley, was the Thumb, tallest of all these marvels of nature—the Thumb, which had already extracted the death toll from four men who had dared try to scale her.

There was a cold dew falling, and Sam Belknap shivered on his talroan, his pot belly shaking. "Never liked this dang place. You figger to start climbin' afore the dew settles, Ross? If ye do, ya'd better loosen your muscles a little."

Ross didn't answer at once, and Jeff looked at him queerly, wondering if his friend had already lost heart for the venture. Then Asa Petrie was chiding at Sam. "Leave the boy be, Sam. He's got a mind full of things to think of. If you'd been on the job last night, they wouldn't none of us be out here this mornin'."

"A smart lawman," Sam said heavily, "can tell when he's got a right t' butt in, an' when he doesn't. If Ross had his mind set to tackle this thing, it wa'n't my place to stop him."

"Maybe you're too smart," Petrie said. "Smart lawmen ain't always the most efficient."

Sam Belknap suddenly froze in the saddle. He stared at Petrie for a long moment. His voice came, hard, icy, "Meanin' what—exactly?"

Petrie shrugged. "Somebody tried to drygulch Ross last night, right out in the main street. Reckon that *was* your business, but you wasn't nowheres around. That was smart of you, to one way of thinkin'."

The pot-bellied lawman gasped at

(Continued On Page 82)

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(Continued From Page 80)

the effrontery of Petrie's accusation. "You tryin' t' say I was stayin' outta the way from danger? Listen, Asa, for a plugged nickel I'd pull you offa that hoss and handwhup you. You been meddlin' into my business too dang much lately."

"And you been meddlin' in mine," snapped Petrie. "I don't have to put up with your snoopin', Sam. I run an honest livery business, an' no pot-bellied old coot like you's got any right t' be questionin' where I get my money."

"Hey," Jeff said. "Here, hold it, you two. You're not going to do any good that way. What the devil's got into you old coyotes?"

There never had been much friendship between Petrie and Sam Belknap; Jeff knew. But it certainly was an unfortunate time for matters to boil to a head between the pair of quick-tempered old buckos. Jeff shot a quick side-wise glance toward Ross. Ross was biting his lip. He looked flustered, and impatient with the turn the talk had taken, as if the conflict had unnerved him.

Jeff went on: "Save that talk, at least until Ross gets started." He spurred his horse alongside of Ross. "How you feelin', boy?"

"I'm all right, Jeff." Ross' tone lacked conviction. "Keep them old fools quiet until I get up aways, will you?"

"Sure. Ross, you ain't—hung over, are you?"

"My mouth's sour. But I'm all right."

"Your side ache, does it, where that polecat plugged you?"

"Just a little."

ROSS had dismounted. He was already moving around the base of the Thumb, trying to pick out the best possible place to start climbing. He chose his spot, grabbed a bit of vine, and hoisted himself upward a little. He had Asa Petrie's Manila hemp line slung over his belt.

Ross kept inching stubbornly upward. After he'd gone about twenty feet, he found the trail that his predecessors had followed. They had carved a succession of handholds in the raw face of the rock, and this

made easy going for Ross, for the first twenty minutes. He was a hundred feet up, when Sam Belknap and Asa Petrie picked up their discussion where they'd let off.

Asa was not at all cowed by the badge on the pot-bellied lawman. "I'm in business," he told Sam. "I got just as much right as the next man to demand some real protection for my property holdings. I don't figure you're givin' me that protection, Sam, if you *must* know how come I been criticizin' your methods. Banks been held up twice in three years, an' whoever done it got away clean. McGaffrey ain't the type to squawk about it, but he's lost thousands in liquor on them stage holdups."

"Well," McGaffrey looked unhappy about it, "why don't you let up on it, Asa? If I'm not kickin'—"

"It's your place to," Petrie snapped. "A sheriff's supposed to enforce the law. If Sam can't do it, he's got no right wearin' that badge, the way I look at it."

Jeff said wearily, "What's the use of all the chin music about it, Petrie." He paused. "Seems t' me you're actin' durn funny, pickin' a time like this t' be pickin' on Sam's law enforcin' methods. Any man actin' accordin' to natural instincts would be focusin' his eyes on Ross up there—an' keep his trap shut."

McGaffrey smiled. Sam Belknap slapped his fat thigh and chuckled outright. Asa Petrie's hawk face grew livid. "The only reason I'm bringin' it up now, young feller, is because of one thing: if Ross don't make it, you can say to yourself, just as sure as shootin', Sam killed him. Because, Sam coulda stopped him, if he'd been willin' to let himself in for a bit o' trouble."

Above, just then, there was a piercing cry, a sharp yelp of pain. Jeff's heart leaped and he craned his neck, shading his eyes to peer upward. What he saw was almost enough to knock him down with the sick helpless agony of the moment.

Ross had reached for a jutting ledge above him, and then his hand withdrew as if he'd touched the top of a hot stove. He was flung off bal-

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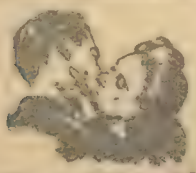

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ance by the violence of the motion. He teetered away from the cliff face a moment, hung precariously, swaying out over the gasping party directly beneath.

"Grab!" Jeff spat the word upward. "Grab that ledge, Ross!"

It was all Ross could do, now. He tried for that handgrip again, hung suspended on weakening arms a brief moment. And then, abruptly, he lost his grip on the ledge.

Jeff saw his friend's stocky body start careening down toward him, growing swiftly in size with each split second of dizzy descent. Jeff stood frozen. He put up his hands, would have attempted to break the fall for Ross, but a pair of rough hands caught him by the shoulders, yanked him backward.

"Git, ya dang fool!"

It was Petrie. Jeff struggled, would have clubbed the man. Then he heard the sickening thud of Ross' body directly behind him, and stood paralyzed, stricken.

"Ross. Ross!" It was Sam Belknap's voice. The fat man was choking, almost crying the name.

Jeff could not force himself to turn around. "Is—is he dead, Sam?"

"Fraid so, younker." Sam's voice was very gentle.

JEFF turned and looked at the body of his friend, knelt by him and picked up his right hand. He looked at the fingers. They were cut and bruised, and something about the way they were cut brought a suspicious glint to Jeff's pale eyes.

He couldn't think very straight. All he could feel was the dreadful impact of the moment. Ross was gone. And only a minute ago he'd been so very much alive and happy. Why hadn't Jeff stopped him, made him see sense? But why had Ross acted so doggone stubborn?

Petrie was saying in a hard voice, scornful and bitter. "I told you, Sam. You should have stopped him. You can't deny I told you your duty."

"Shut up," snapped the sheriff. "Shut up, Petrie, blast you, or I'll—"

"You'll what," Petrie mocked him.

Sam Belknap glared at the man.

He was in misery, in this moment. He was a servant of the law, and as such, he could not very well gunfight Asa Petrie. Petrie knew it, and Sam knew it. He subsided. He said to Jeff, "I'm sorry as a man can be that this happened, Jeff. Come on. Let's get him up on his hoss and get out of here, afore this place drives us all crazy."

They took Ross' body to Doc Hanley's office. Doc undressed him. He looked mildly surprised when Jeff put in a request for the clothes Ross had been wearin'. Even Petrie was too dumb to understand it, until Jeff said dully, "Sentimental reasons. Ross was my pard. I'd like that rope and them shoes you let him use, too, Asa. I'd be willin' to pay full value for 'em."

"No," Petrie said. "You can have 'em for free." His bleak eyes were cloudy. "Seems like a crazy sort of request, young feller."

Maybe it does, Jeff thought. *And maybe I feel sort of crazy, too.* Maybe the whole world had gone crazy, if what he was really thinking about Ross' death proved to be true. But there was no point in telling Asa Petrie why he wanted the hobnail shoes Ross had been wearing, on his trip over the Great Divide.

BY FIVE o'clock of the following morning, Jeff Stevens had carefully inched his way halfway up the face of the Thumb. He was taking the same course that Ross took, the previous morning. He was very careful. He had marked the ledge where Ross met his fate, and as he approached closer and closer to it, his heart pumped faster. He had to stop from time to time to slow his panting breaths.

Ever since the first look he had taken at Ross' cut fingers, yesterday morning, the conviction had grown in Jeff that something had happened out here which would bear careful investigation.

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low the matter to drop out of his thoughts.

Now he was directly beneath the ledge which Ross had reached for just as he toppled down to his death. Jeff took a slow glance downward. It was a dizzy long distance down to the bottom, and he looked up again quickly, feeling the beads of sweat pop out on his forehead.

One thing he did not mean to do. He was not going to reach a hand over that inviting ledge as Ross did. He took out the small pick, and gouged out a small gripping spot directly beneath the spot Ross had grabbed for. Then he hoisted his head and shoulders slowly above it.

What he saw made his brain spin with a white anger. There was the flash of steel there just over the rim of the ledge. The sharp blade of a hunting knife had been carefully bedded into the stone. In a flash, Jeff saw what had happened to Ross.

In grabbing for a handhold on the ledge, his fingers had dragged down hard on the knife edge. He had been cut, badly. And losing his grip, he had gone plummeting down to his death.

But what sort of a mind, Jeff wondered, could contrive such a brutal method of murder? And for what possible reason? Ross had no enemies. At least, none Jeff knew of.

He hoisted himself up onto the ledge, and sat there, panting and still bristling with anger. Could it be, he wondered, that somebody had very good reasons for wanting the Thumb to remain unscaled? If so, the knife was an artful way of insuring against it. The thought stayed with him. He could at least satisfy his curiosity about what was up there.

He stood up on the ledge and stared at the small patch of sandstone that remained between himself and his goal now. There was a tough climb ahead of him now, but a supreme effort for a very short time would do the trick from this point, he reasoned.

He was reaching up for a grip on the small ledge above him when a voice from below held him frozen with surprise.

"All right, Stevens," Asa Petrie was saying. "You can come the other way now. Either you come down under your own power, or I'll pop you down off there."

Jeff stared beneath him. Petrie stood at the base of the Thumb. He was waving a brace of long-barreled Colts as if he meant business.

Jeff said, "What's the idea, Asa?"

Petrie laughed on a gutteral note. "You're too curious, kid. I thought you'd be high-tailin' back here this mornin'. You didn't want that rope and them hobnails for sentimental reasons. Don't know who you hoped to fool with that story. Now git down off there, pronto, afore I start practicin' my aim on you."

Jeff was perspiring freely now. He had no gun. There was no chance to hide himself from the bullets, once Petrie started shooting. He said numbly, "You killed Ross, Petrie. Just as sure is if you'd stuck a knife in him. I oughta—"

"So you found the blade, hey?" Petrie was grinning up evilly at him. "You're a smart kid, Stevens. Too smart. It's a shame, in a way. I never had much against you. Or Ross either, for that matter. But I ain't lettin' him or you either ruin the beautiful hideout I got up on top of this rock."

"Hideout?" Jeff breathed. "For what?" There was a lot of space on top of the Thumb, he realized. Could it be the man had fashioned some sort of a cave or den up there? He said, "You don't need a hideout, Petrie."

JEFF felt a sinking sensation inside. He glanced above, to the top of the Thumb. A pair of mat-bearded, squint-eyed faces peered down raffishly at him. "Ain't he cute?" one man said, and spat downward. "Jus' like a Swiss mountain climber."

"He's clumb his last mountain," the other observed drily.

Jeff said weakly, "I get it, Petrie. This explains how come they could rob the bank and get away clean both times. And how come the stage gets held up so often. And you just been runnin' that livery stable of yours for

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a front. A good place to get the right tips for these fellows, so they'll know what place to hit next."

"You're finally wakin' up," Petrie laughed shortly. "Now start climbin' down off that damn cliff face, before I blast you."

Jeff started climbing down, as ordered. He had no choice, really. Naturally, he had left his gun down below, not wanting to be hampered in his climb. And they had him covered at both top and bottom.

He knew how Asa Petrie's shrewd mind was working. The man wanted him down on the ground before he plugged him. Jeff's body with a bullet hole in it was one thing, when finally discovered, as eventually it must be. But Jeff's body displaying the bruises of a fall from the Thumb, and a bullet hole in addition, would be cause for a great deal of conjecture. Somebody must have had a very good reason to keep him from climbing the Thumb, would be the logical conclusion. And then maybe Sam Belknap would really investigate the towering rock's secret.

Jeff was within twenty feet of the bottom, wondering just how many seconds he'd live once his feet hit the bottom of the Valley, when a slug snarled close to the grinning stable owner below him and spatted viciously against the side of the Thumb. The scream of the bullet was followed almost instantly by the distant spat of a high powered rifle.

Jeff looked down in surprise. Asa Petrie had whirled toward the sound, snarling, showing his teeth in anger. Two hundred yards away, a head showed behind a huge boulder, and a voice boomed across the floor of the valley.

It was Sheriff Sam Belknap, speaking from behind a long-barreled rifle. "Jig's up, Asa. Put up them han's, if you know what's good for you."

In answer, Petrie flung a quick shot at the distant lawman. Then he was running around the foot of the Thumb, taking cover. Sam leveled the rifle and a bullet whined close to Petrie's head as he scurried behind the sandstone bulwark.

"Frenchy," he was yelling. "Chuck! Drop that damn ladder. And hurry!"

(Continued On Page 90)

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(Continued From Page 88)

Jeff took this moment to get himself down off the side of the Thumb. He ran, leaning low, across the way toward the sheriff. "There's two of Petrie's men up on top," he panted. "They've got a rope ladder, I reckon. They must have long range guns up there. They can pick us off like flies here, Sam. They've got the height. A good marksman up there"—he waved at the top of the Thumb—"can command the whole floor of the valley."

Sam Belknap was nodding slowly. He didn't seem much perturbed by the situation. "I know, Jeff," he was saying. "I heard you an' Asa confabbin'. He sure meant to plug you. But I suspicioned he was usin' the top o' the Thumb fer some sort of illegal high jinks since yestiddy. I came prepared for trouble this mornin'."

"You—you mean you knew too?" Jeff gasped. "That I was going to climb it this mornin'—to see what happened to poor Ross up there?"

"SURE did. And I was pretty sure Petrie'd follow ya out here." He glanced up reflectively toward the top of the Thumb. "Reckon Asa oughta clumb that there ladder by this time." He lifted his voice, sent it booming across the Valley. "Might's well come down peaceable, Asa. You may think you can hang on up there, till we starve ye out. But that ain't gonna be necessary."

Petrie was up there, all right. But he didn't show. Only his voice floated back in a fiery challenge. "Do yore damnedest, Sam. No old moss-back like you'll ever take me!"

Sam sighed. "Here, younker," he said. "You keep me covered." He thrust the rifle into Jeff's hands. Jeff protested, but Sam was gone, running in swift zigzag strides toward the base of the Thumb. Once a head appeared briefly, behind a rifle barrel, up there. Jeff put a bullet dangerously close. The head disappeared, and stayed behind cover.

Sam lumbered on more swiftly then. He went around the base of the tall rock finger, tugging at something within his shirt, and was gone from Jeff's line of vision for more than ten minutes. So long in fact, that Jeff grew concerned about him.

"Sam! Sam Belknap. Where the devil are ya?" he called anxiously.

"Here, boy. Right behind ya."

And he was, by golly. The old lawman could move with stealth, for all his girth, and the deceptively clumsy attitudes he affected. He had skirted Jeff somehow and approached from behind. Jeff said, "What's up? How're you—"

"Wait." Sam cautioned. He took out a heavy gold watch and glanced at it. "Any time at all now, young feller. Any—"

And then it came. Jeff was rocked back, flung bodily to the ground by the terrific impact of explosion. He could not tear his eyes from the base of the Thumb. Bits of the face were scaling loose, trickling downward. It was beginning to belly out in the middle. The echo of that thunderous explosion rocked and rolled through the Valley, and now the whole long length of the Thumb was toppling sidewise. Jeff thought of the leaning tower of Pisa.

And then, for just a brief moment, he saw Petrie. The man stood in silhouette against the pale morning sky, in a grotesque, gesticulating attitude. He was flinging his long arms wildly about him, and even at such a distance you could read the terror within the man, the terrific shock to his soul as he felt his small stone sanctuary crumpling, hurtling earthward beneath him.

There was silence, at last. Bits of stone fell for what seemed a long time. There was a great deal of dust, and Sam Belknap was coughing.

Jeff said with a dry throat. "Dynamite, you cagey old devil. Well, I reckon that pays off the score for what happened to Ross. And the Thumb had claimed her last victim. I always had you pegged down for a pretty smart man, Sheriff. But you sure s'prised me this time. How'd you ever think of dynamite. It was the only thing."

Sam Belknap was quietly smiling. "You believe this or not, as you like, younker. It was Petrie himself, give me that idea. It's—well, it's kind of crazy—but things like this happen, sometimes."

"Petrie?" Jeff stared. "How?"

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His employer laughed. "Surely you don't expect me to believe [illegible] in only six weeks. Why—a great many of our stenographers have studied shorthand for ten months or a year or more and still they don't do any better than you."

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For answer the girl handed the big business man her notebook.

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"I—huh?"

"Sure," smiled Sam Belknap, and his pot belly shook with the irony of it. "Thumbs down, get it. Let your mind play around with that thought a little. That's what mine did, an' come up with dynamite for an answer. So the Thumb's down, and our smart friend Petrie's down too—buried underneath it.

(THE END)

Answers to Wild West Quiz

1. 50. There were, however, many excellent horses that could have travelled more, if ridden carefully.
2. 640
3. Bacon
4. Saddle horses
5. Bury the dead
6. Chuck
7. The cowboy who rounds up the herd.
8. Horse herd
9. The cook
10. Hands

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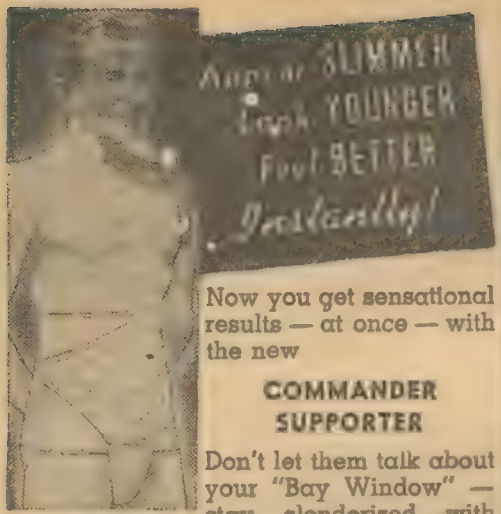

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(Continued From Page 34)

looks like he's just shook hands with a wildcat and the feline wasn't eager to make his acquaintance.

Hell-on-Wheels McManus crawls out from under the low ledge when he sees the old cow has quit the race and smiles sheepishly at me. His eyebrows lower then and he looks mad-like. "Guess that'll teach the old devil!" he says.

WE FINALLY catch Ravel-tongue's gray, find the bunged-up saddle, and start back, riding double. When we're a half mile from the ranch house, Ravel-tongue pulls the gray to a halt and says: "Walk on in from here, will-yuh, Beanpole. Here's a ten you can give the boys. I'll write you where to send the rest of my things."

"What you talkin' about, Ravel-tongue?" I ask, playing ignorant.

The battered 'poke shakes his head and explains. "I'm ridin' on in to the station to catch the 7:15!" he says. "My vacation's over. I'm huntin' an easy, safe job now!" Hell-on-Wheels McManus runs a briar-scratched hand through his wild hair and sighs heavily. "Like herdin' wild buffalo in the Dakota badlands, f'instance!"

"What about the old ladina?" I ask, looking worried.

"She'll struggle along without me," Ravel-tongue says. "That old cow don't need no brand on her hip." The 'poke bogs his spurs and calls back over his shoulder. "Far as I'm concerned, she looks plumb good without it!"

(THE END)

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Judge Bates' Gun-Bought Gold

(Continued From Page 26)

Judge Carter said, shakily, "I never killed him, Bates. I just couldn't bring myself to that—I broke his shoulder."

'We'll need him to make a confession about hanging Hingerton," said Judge Bates. "That will square you with the local miners, Carter."

Tobacco Jones knelt beside Jud Malone. "He's all dead." He got to his feet. "Here comes your wife, Carter."

They lined the miners up and disarmed them. To a man, they were staring at the tunnel, waiting. Finally the suspense grew too great.

"Why don't that dynamite bust loose, Bates?"

Judge Bates chuckled. "That fuse was tied to a bunch of rocks. You don't think we'd blow up a mine as rich as this, do you? We'd cover up a fortune forever."

One stared. "Well I'll be damned," he said.

They tied the miners' hands with a length of rope. A few minutes later they all rode toward Jergens Bend with the prisoners riding ahead, their wrists tied to their saddlehorns and with Tobacco Jones leading their horses by a long length of rope tied from bit to bit. Mrs Carter, riding heavily on a big gray, rode beside the gaunt postmaster.

"Things worked out pretty well," said Judge Lemanuel Bates. "I understand there's a federal reward out for Malone. We'll give that to Mrs Hingerton, the wife of the hanged miner."

"She has two young children," said Judge Carter solemnly.

Judge Bates drank from his jug. "Then we go fishing, huh, Judge?"

Judge Jeremiah Carter nodded. And Judge Lemanuel Bates raised his jug. "Here's to the big rainbow trout in yonder streams," he said, looking at the mountain wilderness ahead of them.

He drank deeply.

(THE END)

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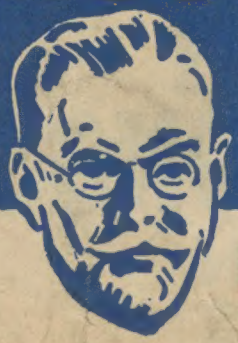

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